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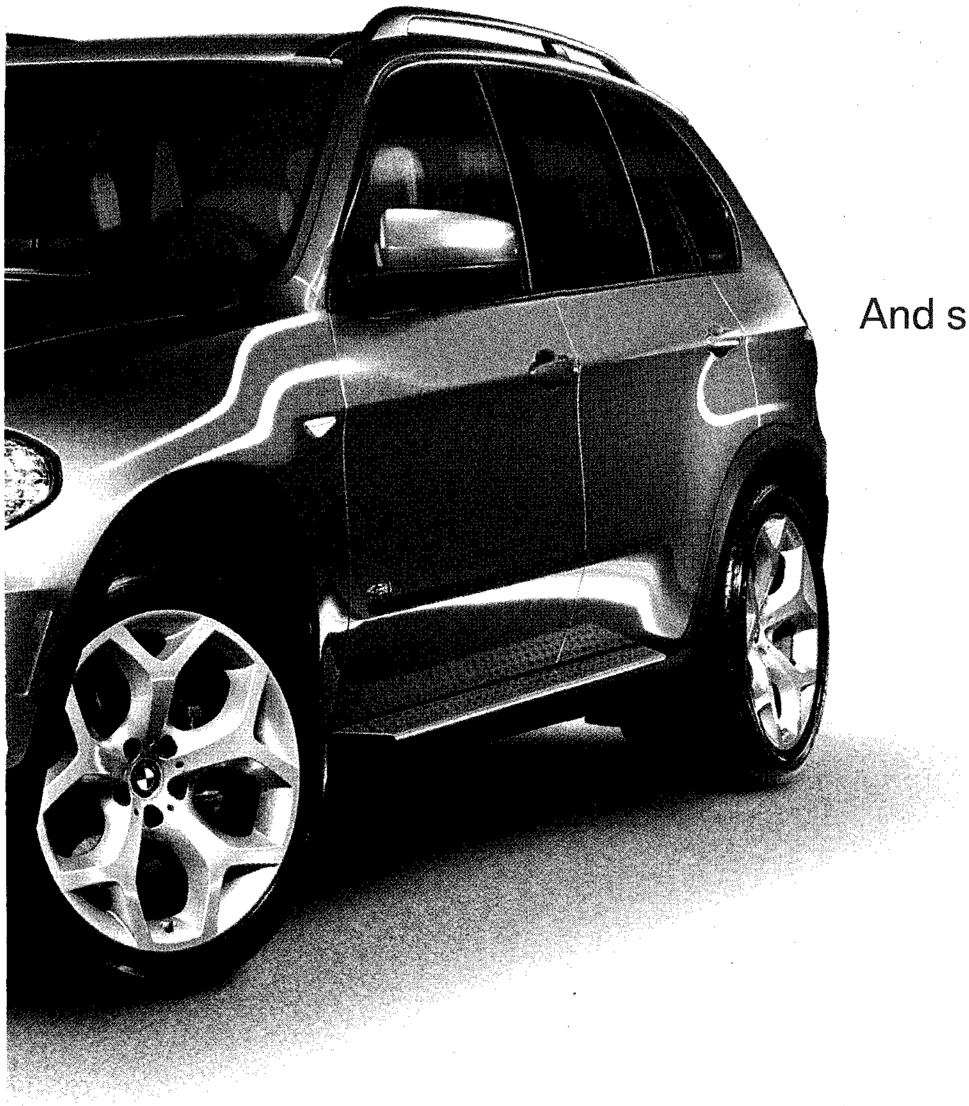

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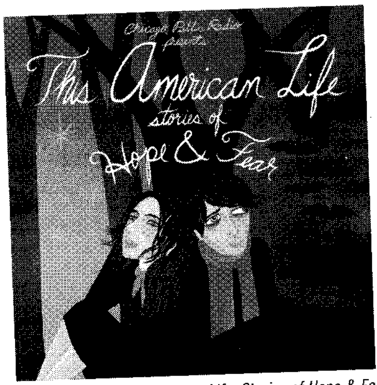

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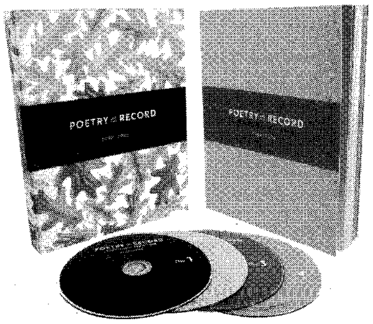

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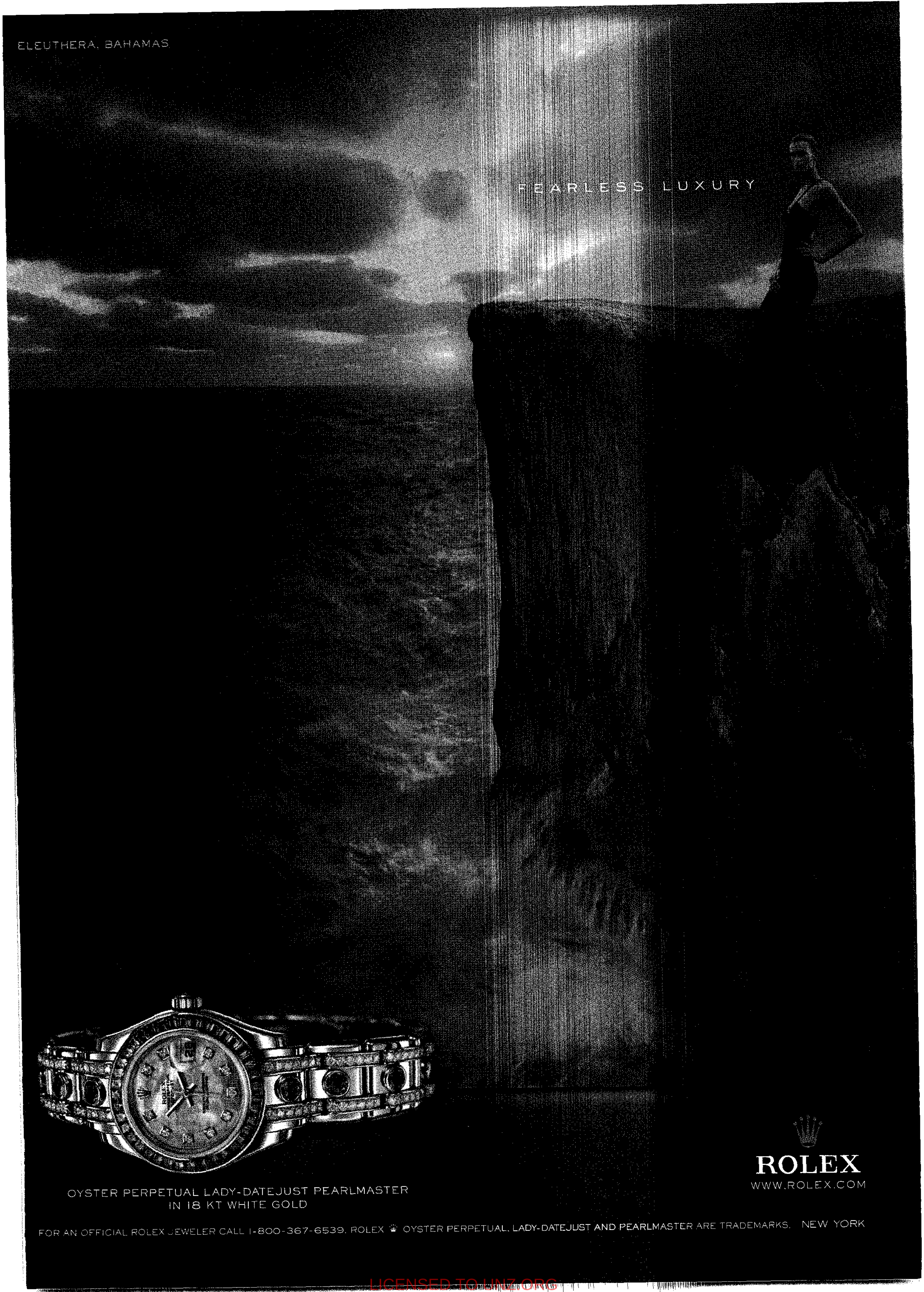
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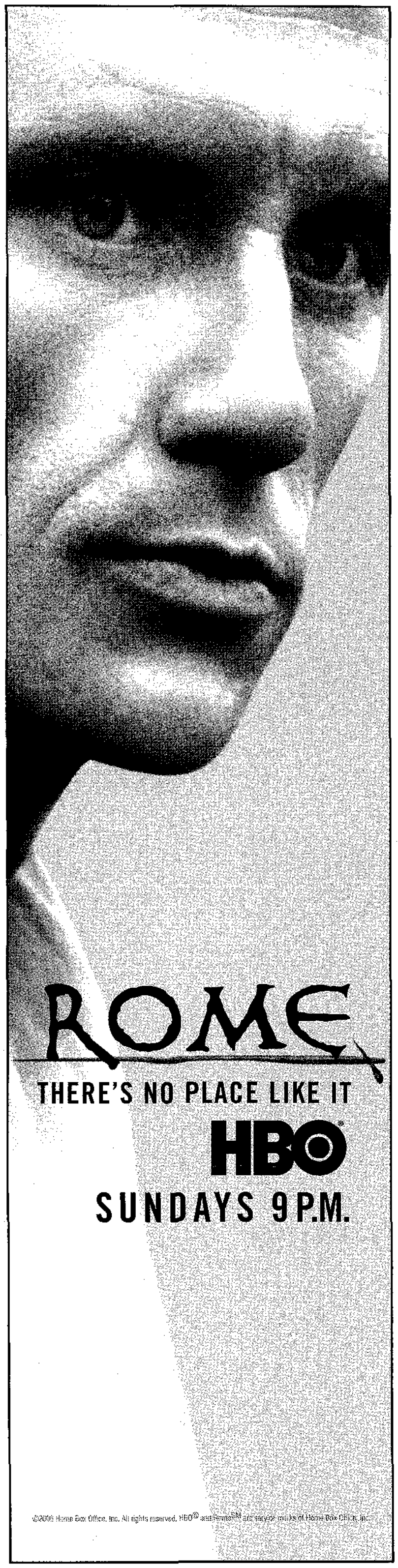
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CONTRIBUTORS

Jeffrey Goldberg ("The Starting Gate," p. 26) is the author of "Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide," which was published in October.

Hendrik Hertzberg (Comment, p. 21), a staff writer and senior editor, writes frequently about politics and policy. His book "Politics: Observations & Arguments" is out in paperback.

Shalom Auslander ("Playoffs," p. 38) is the author of "Beware of God" and "Foreskin's Lament," which will be published later this year.

Paul Rudnick (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 37) is a regular contributor of humor pieces. A production of his play "Regrets Only" is being presented at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Pankaj Mishra (Books, p. 80) is the author of "The Romantics," a novel, and "Temptations of the West."

Katherine Boo ("Expectations," p. 44) is a staff writer and a MacArthur Fellow.

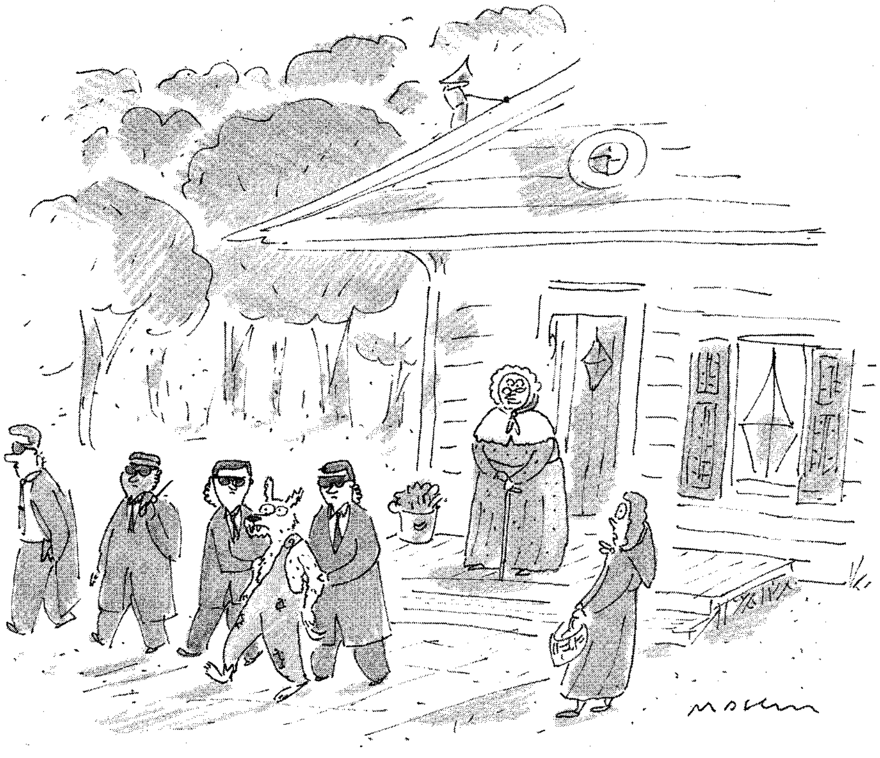
Rebecca Mead ("An Acquiring Eye," p. 58) has been writing for the magazine since 1997.

William Trevor (Fiction, p. 68) has published fifteen novels and eleven collections of short stories, including "A Bit on the Side."

Adam Kirsch (Books, p. 74) is a poet and the book critic for the New York *Sun*.

Michael Blumenthal (Poem, p. 78) has written six collections of poems, including "Days We Would Rather Know" and "Dusty Angel."

Eric Drooker (Cover) is the author of "Flood!," a novel in pictures, and the illustrator of "Illuminated Poems," by Allen Ginsberg, both of which have just been reissued. ◆



"My, my, Grandma, what tight security you have!"

THE MAIL

A STUDY OF WAR

As George Packer writes, a counter-insurgency policy that pays attention to local values and needs is certainly better than one that relies on unexamined assumptions and brute force ("Knowing the Enemy," December 18th). But it is not surprising that anthropologists are reluctant to participate in the military's new initiatives. Our research relies on the trust of the people we are studying; a hidden counter-insurgency agenda destroys that trust. Further, the mission is impossible: to "win" a war that posits an amorphous yet ubiquitous "evil" as our adversary. Perhaps the American values, goals, and beliefs that propel us toward such a war should be analyzed alongside the values, goals, and beliefs of those we seek to defeat.

Charles Lindholm
University Professor of Anthropology
Boston University
Boston, Mass.

Montgomery McFate, an anthropologist and Pentagon consultant, is quoted by Packer as saying that "there was a thing called the Cold War, and we nearly lost. And there was no guarantee that we were going to win." Yet it was not the United States, or the West, that won the Cold War; it was the people of the Eastern Bloc countries who did away with the dictatorial regimes they were living under. In the same way, there is no winning or losing in Iraq for the U.S. What was an insurgency against an occupant has become a sectarian war, and now the question is how to limit the number of dead with which the road to political stability is paved.

Gustaaf Brooijmans
New York City

DIVINE TRUTHS

Anthony Gottlieb, in reviewing two new Descartes biographies, writes that Descartes, in one of the "flimsiest parts" of his philosophy, argues that God would not deceive us (Books, November 20th). Actually, Descartes argues not that God *would* not deceive us but that he *could* not deceive us. Deception, Descartes maintains, is incompatible with the divine attributes of perfection and omnipotence. (Presumably, God could obtain whatever ends he chooses via direct power rather than by resorting to deception.) Such a subjection of divine nature to the demands of human rationality has prompted many an interpreter to conclude that Descartes in a sense replaces God with himself (not with himself personally but with the autonomous "*ego cogito*").

Joseph Cosgrove
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
Providence College
Providence, R.I.

REMEMBERING TROW

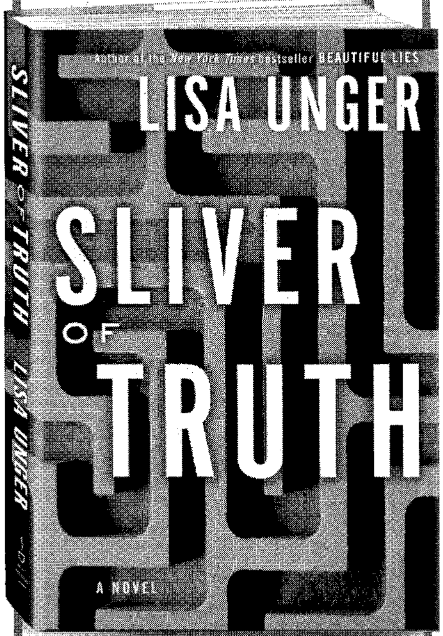
As a friend and sometime colleague of George W. S. Trow, I was moved by Hendrik Hertzberg's tribute to him (The Talk of the Town, December 11th). The poignancy of George's recent death, in Naples, following many restless years far away from New York City and his beloved Hudson Valley, is increased by the certainty that in Italy he had mostly cut himself off from conversing in English in his customary way. He used the language with more sophistication, more daring personal style, than any American I have ever known. (As one example, he taught me the deprecatory use of the word "vivid," when applied to a personality.) After five years in Naples, George surely must have felt himself to be an exile from his spoken mother tongue. Shakespeare sums up this kind of loss in "Richard II," when Thomas Mowbray, just exiled for life by King Richard, laments, "And now my tongue's use is to me no more / Than an unstringed viol or a harp."

James Ivory
Buenos Aires, Argentina

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. They can also be faxed to 212-286-5047. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

Her past
was a lie.
Her future
is a *killer.*


Author of the New York Times bestseller BEAUTIFUL LIES
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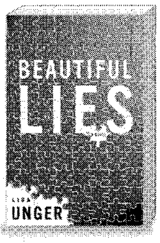

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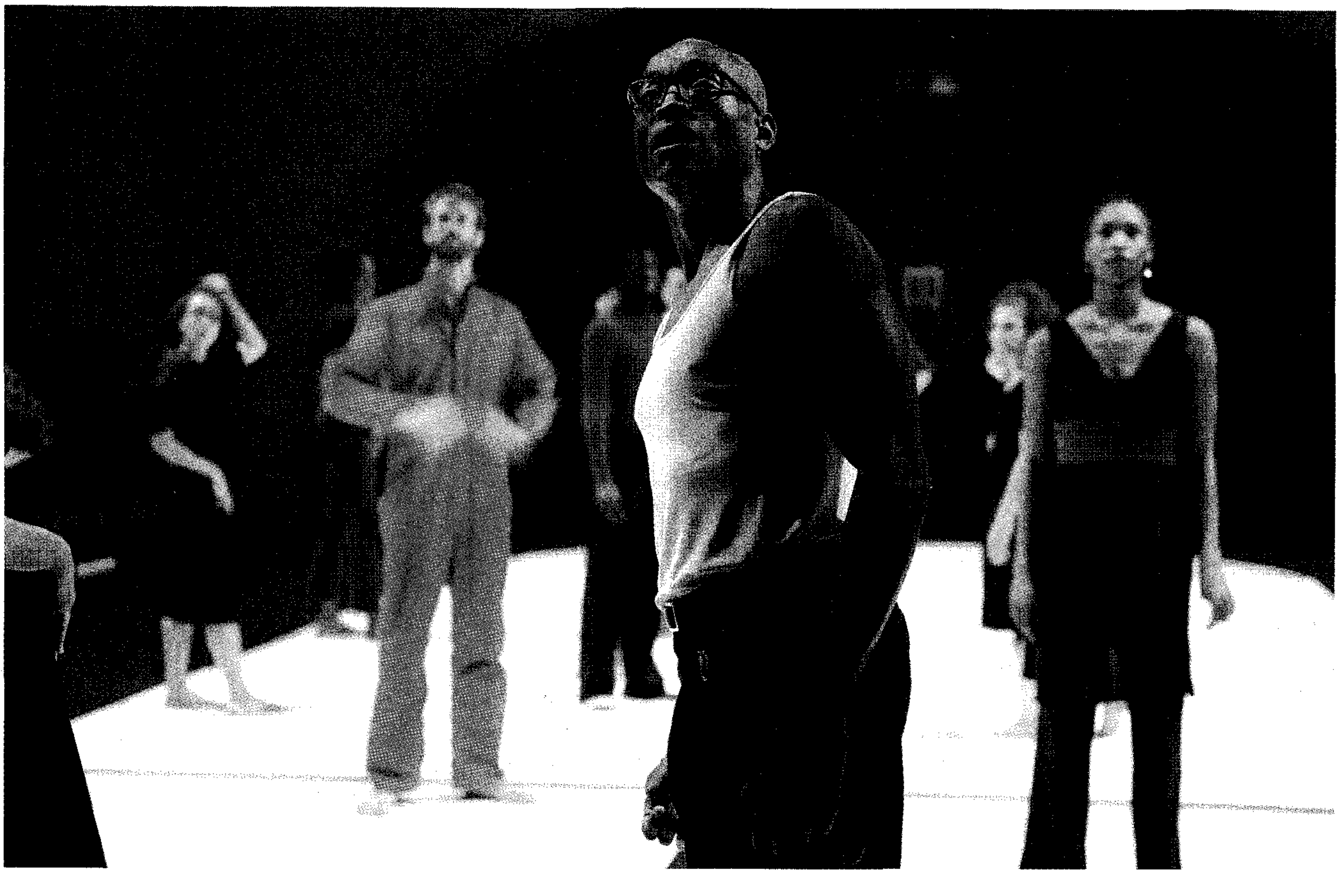


Bill T. Jones rehearsing at the Gatehouse, in Harlem. Photograph by Gus Powell.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
14	15	16	10	11	12	13

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
HOUSEBOUND

Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings may have been sleek and seamless, but his personal life was more chaotic. At Playwrights Horizons, Richard Nelson's new play, "Frank's Home," set in California in the summer of 1923, depicts the architect's strained relationships with his adult children. (See page 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
JET LAG

The Cold War Kids, a much buzzed-about band from Long Beach, California, that plays a jerky, piano-driven brand of rock, is shuttling between coasts for weekly shows in both Los Angeles and New York City this month. The first installment of the East Coast run is at Pianos on Wednesday. (See page 9.)

ART
FOURSQUARE

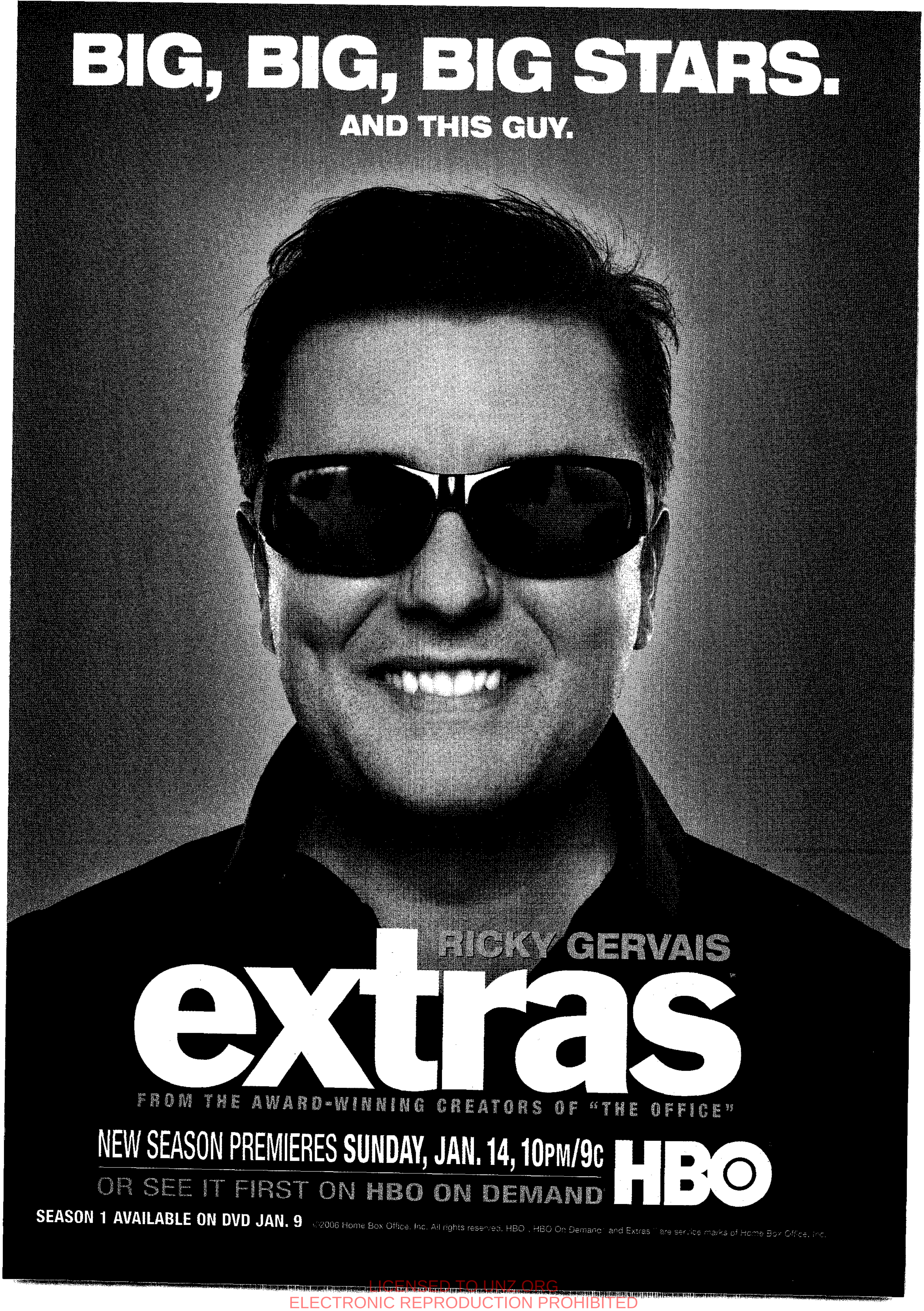
The Italian artist Giulio Paolini, born in 1940, is the subject of a four-venue show stretching across two continents. The local examples of this Arte Povera innovator's work can be found uptown, at Marian Goodman, and in Chelsea, at Yvon Lambert (the Paris branches of these two galleries will host other parts of the show). Each of the four locations contains four works, which are in turn made up of quartets of elements. (See page 12.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
DANCE CARD

Dicapo Opera often pursues interesting projects in the shadow of the Met and City Opera. This week, the company hands over the reins to two choreographers, Nilas Martins and Stephen Pier, who will stage two early Puccini works, "Le Villi" and "Messa di Gloria," respectively. (See page 15.)

MOVIES
BILIOUS WILDER

Billy Wilder's 1951 drama, "Ace in the Hole," has a jaundiced view of American hucksterism and vulgarity that would do Mencken proud. Kirk Douglas stars as a small-time reporter who exploits the tale of a man trapped in a mine shaft. The film was a flop with the public it insulted, and was repackaged for television as "The Big Carnival"; Film Forum is bringing it back in a restored print. (See page 17.)



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CLASSICAL NOTES
BEST OF 2006

Louis Andriessen, "Writing to Vermeer" (Nonesuch)—The setting of the brilliantly eclectic Dutch composer's recent opera (with a libretto by Peter Greenaway) alternates between the quotidian serenity of the painter's household and the senseless violence of Holland's "Year of Disasters," 1672. Reinbert de Leeuw leads an incisive performance.
C. P. E. Bach, "Symphonies 1-4; Cello Concerto in A" (Harmonia Mundi)—The bewitchingly complex music of J. S. Bach's most talented son is more than just a connoisseur's indulgence. These renditions, by Andrew Manze's superb English Concert, are marked by a delicate balance of passion and poise.
Sebastian Currier, "Quartetset/Quiet Time" (New World)—Currier is a subtle yet potent artist whose impeccable craft never overshadows his gifts for lyricism and surprise. The Cassatt Quartet plays these unexpectedly moving works with all the nimbleness and warmth that they demand.
"Angelika Kirchschlager: Handel Arias" (Sony/BMG)—The glamorous Austrian mezzo-soprano, known for her mastery of lieder and for originating the title role in Nicholas Maw's opera "Sophie's Choice," turns her melting voice to a variety of dazzling works by the doyen of Baroque opera; Laurence Cummings and the Kammerorchester Basel provide excellent support.
Peter Lieberson, "Neruda Songs" (Nonesuch)—There will likely be no more fitting memorial to the astonishing talent of the mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson than this live recording of her husband's last, lovely work for her, recorded with James Levine conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra.
"George Perle: A Retrospective" (Bridge)—In the hands of this deeply respected American composer, twelve-tone technique acquires an entrancing grace and a gentle beauty. In a ninetieth-birthday tribute, Bridge offers a selection of performances by a host of talented and committed advocates, including the pianist Richard Goode.
Franz Schreker, "Die Gezeichneten" (EuroArts)—The Schreker revival continues with this DVD of a stunning production from the 2005 Salzburg Festival. His tale of murder and sexual obsession in Renaissance Genoa has a decadent, Freudian tinge, but no composer since Mozart moves his action along with such assurance. The splendid soprano Anne Schwanewilms leads the cast.
Shostakovich, "String Quartets Nos. 3, 7, and 8" (Deutsche Grammophon; EMI)—Two magnificent recordings of the same works cap the Russian composer's centenary year. The first, by the Hagen Quartet, offers readings of cool precision and blistering objectivity; the second, by the St. Lawrence String Quartet, features impassioned performances full of operatic lyricism and structural insight.
Szymanowski, "Harnasie, Orchestral Songs" (EMI)—Few conductors record more than Simon Rattle, and none with such uneven results. He is in his element here, leading graceful, sinuous, and flawlessly paced performances of these sumptuous works with his old friends at the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.
"Frank Peter Zimmermann/Heinrich Schiff" (ECM)—Two soloists of fierce intelligence and implacable virtuosity offer commanding performances of Ravel's Sonata for Violin and Cello and of fascinating works by Honegger, Martinů, Bach, and Matthias Pintscher.

—*Russell Platt*

THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

AS YET THOU ART YOUNG AND RASH
Target Margin Theatre begins its season of updated Greek classics with this adaptation of Euripides' war-minded play "Suppliants." David Herskovits directs. In previews. Opens Jan. 14. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-352-3101.)

AT LEAST IT'S PINK
A new musical by Bridget Everett, Michael Patrick King ("Sex and the City"), and Kenny Mellman (of Kiki & Herb), in which a young woman journeys from Manhattan, Kansas, to Manhattan, New York. King also directs. Previews begin Jan. 16. (Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. 212-868-4444.)

DUTCHMAN
A revival of Amiri Baraka's 1964 race drama, about a white woman's seduction of a black man on a train. Opens Jan. 16. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 212-989-2020.)

THE FEVER
Wallace Shawn plays a man of privilege who is forced to confront the poverty of the Third World in the New Group's revival of his one-person drama. Scott Elliott directs. In previews. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

FRANK'S HOME
A new play by Richard Nelson ("James Joyce's The Dead") explores Frank Lloyd Wright's troubled family life. Robert Falls directs. Previews begin Jan. 13. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

GET YOUR WAR ON
As part of the "Under the Radar" festival, Rude Mechanicals brings David Rees's political comic strip to the stage, in an adaptation by Kirk Lynn. In previews. Opens Jan. 11. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

IN THE HEIGHTS
The ethnic mix of Washington Heights is the focus of this new musical, with music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda and a book by Quiara Alegria Hudes. In previews. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100.)

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
F. Murray Abraham is Shylock in Theatre for a New Audience's production. Later this month, the play will begin running in alternation with Christopher Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta," with Abraham in the role of Barabas. In previews. (Duke, 229 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

PARTY TIME
The Talking Band's play with music, written and directed by Paul Zimet, follows two soldiers who are stuck in the desert under harrowing circumstances. Opens Jan. 10. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710.)

THE POLISH PLAY
This Katharsis Theatre Company production, conceived and directed by Henry Wishcamper, combines the plots of "Macbeth" and "Ubu Roi" and features a mixed cast of live actors and puppets. Previews begin Jan. 13. (Walker Space, 46 Walker St. 212-868-4444.)

THE SCENE
Tony Shalhoub and Patricia Heaton star in Theresa Rebeck's satire about self-absorbed Manhattan partygoers. Directed by Rebecca Taichman. In previews. Opens Jan. 11. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

A SPANISH PLAY
John Turturro directs Zoe Caldwell and Denis O'Hare in the English-language première of Yasmina Reza's new work, which takes place at a theatre rehearsal. Previews begin Jan. 10. (Classic Stage, 136 E. 13th St. 212-677-4210.)

TOYS IN THE ATTIC
A remounting of Lillian Hellman's last major play, about a New Orleans family that comes into a sudden fortune, with undesirable consequences. Austin Pendleton directs. In previews. Opens Jan. 14. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

TRANSLATIONS
Manhattan Theatre Club revives Brian Friel's drama from 1980, about an Irish town contending with the forces of cultural imperialism. Garry Hynes directs. In previews. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

ANGRY YOUNG WOMEN IN LOW-RISE JEANS WITH HIGH-CLASS ISSUES
Matt Morillo wrote and directs this comedic exploration of urban women and their vexing contradictions. (Theatre for the New City, 155 First Ave., at 10th St. 212-868-4444.)

THE APPLE TREE
Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's 1966 musical, which has been revived by the Roundabout Theatre Company under the lacklustre direction of Gary Griffin, is a triptych of stories about temptation. The first, and most satisfying, is adapted from Mark Twain's "Diary of Adam and Eve," whose tender melancholy fun brings out the best in all the collaborators. (Eve is played by Kristin Chenoweth, who owns the Broadway franchise on this particular brand of 4-H Club buoyancy.) But what's fascinating about the show, which was created by two of Broadway's master craftsmen at the height of their powers, is the uncertainty of its tone and its attack. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/25/06 & 1/1/07.) (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART ONE: VOYAGE
The first play of Tom Stoppard's alternately reckless, romantic, boring, and exhilarating trilogy on the Russian thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century begins at an estate near Moscow, where the Russian nobleman Alexander Bakunin (Richard Easton) lives with his wife, Varvara (Amy Irving), and their four daughters and one son, Michael (Ethan Hawke), who is swept up by the latest rumors from Paris about something called the Romantic Revolution. Stoppard's characters do not live so much as imagine what life could be, if it adhered to their visions. His dramatizations take us on a guided tour of the life of the mind, with all its blind spots, loves, and delusions. Nevertheless, despite Stoppard's obvious brilliance, "Voyage" begins to feel too much like a lesson in Act II, when the action moves to Moscow and the characters are forced to present too many ideas that simply can't be performed. Jack O'Brien directs. (1/8/07) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

THE COAST OF UTOPIA, PART TWO: SHIPWRECK
The political theorist Alexander Herzen (Brían F. O'Byrne) stands at the center of the second part of Stoppard's trilogy. The illegitimate son of a Russian nobleman with close ties to the tsar, Herzen has lived a life marked by difficulty and personifies all that Michael Bakunin (Hawke), a romantic child of privilege, is desperate to escape. In "Shipwreck," Stoppard dissects the absurdism inherent in belief, in a voice that is significantly less preachy than the one he uses in "Voyage." His ambition here is as epic as Bakunin's, and suffused with a pathos that equals Herzen's. But, unlike his often foolish and always sincere characters, he possesses the discipline of a great artist, who knows that in dreams lie responsibili-

ties: to build a world, one must first fashion the bricks. (1/8/07) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

THE COUNTRY WIFE
A staging of William Wycherley's Restoration comedy, about a womanizer who fakes impotence as a way of gaining access to married society ladies. (McGinn/Cazale, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 212-352-3101.)

CULTUREMART
The seventeen new works in this year's festival, which emphasizes mixed media, draw on such diverse disciplines as dance, video, Kabuki, card playing, and beat-boxing. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. For complete schedule, visit www.here.org.)

THE GERMANS IN PARIS
Jonathan Leaf's new play traces the intersecting lives of Heinrich Heine, Richard Wagner, and Karl Marx in eighteen-forties Paris. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 212-352-3101.)

NEW YORK GILBERT & SULLIVAN PLAYERS
The company's thirty-third season features two shows in repertory, "The Mikado" and "The Yeomen of the Guard," as well as a one-night-only performance, on Jan. 11, of "The Rose of Persia," which Sullivan wrote with the librettist Basil Hood. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Jan. 14.)

SPRING AWAKENING
In Michael Mayer's exciting musical reimagining of Frank Wedekind's 1891 play, now on Broadway after a run at the Atlantic Theatre Company, fresh-faced teen-agers in a late-nineteenth-century provincial German town dream of the salvation of the flesh. The awakening, it turns out, is not just to sexuality but also to musical storytelling. The lyricist Steven Sater conveys, in the youths' syntactical fumblings, the inadequacy of speech to cope with the vortex of feeling, and the rigor of Mayer's direction communicates a powerful and poetic intelligence. With music by Duncan Sheik and choreography by Bill T. Jones. (6/26/06) (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

YOU BELONG TO ME: DEATH OF NATIONS PART V
Josh Fox, the founder of the International WOW Company, directs the fifth installment of his experimental play cycle. This latest chapter imagines the final days of three different wars. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 212-352-3101.)

Also Playing

THE BIG VOICE: GOD OR MERMAN?: The Actor's Temple, 339 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **A CHORUS LINE:** Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **COMPANY:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **GREY GARDENS:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **NO CHILD . . . :** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **AN OAK TREE:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 14. **REGRETS ONLY:** City Center, Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **ROOM SERVICE:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **SLAVA'S SNOWSHOW:** Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 212-307-4100. Through Jan. 14. **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **TWO TRAINS RUNNING:** Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. **THE VERTICAL HOUR:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE VOYSEY INHERITANCE:** Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.

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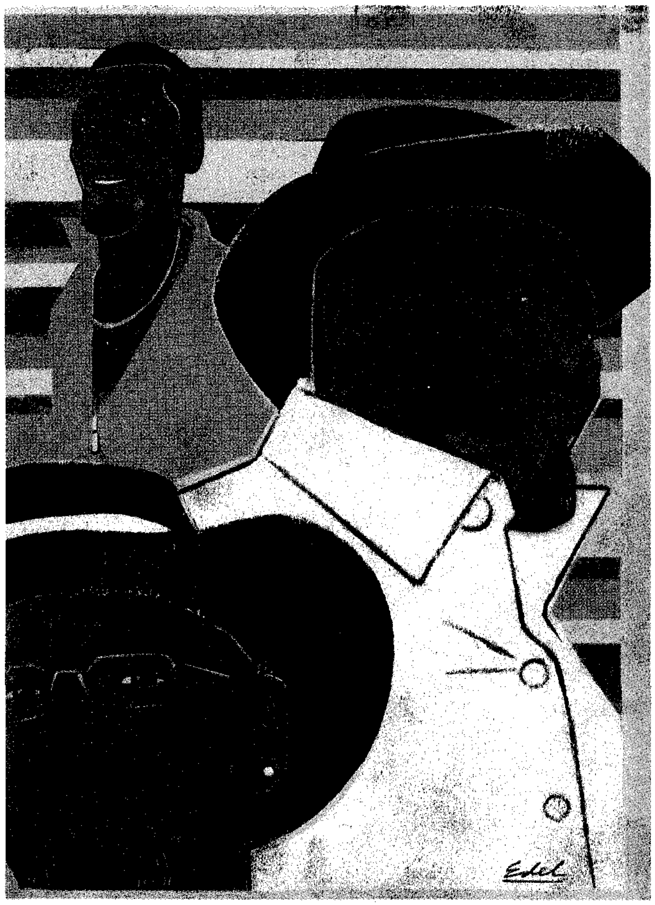
NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Jan. 10: **Dark Funeral**, a loud, scary, and silly death-metal band from Sweden, traffics in blasphemy, Satanism, and other traditional themes. The opening act is **Enslaved**, from Norway. Jan. 11: The blues-harmonica master **James Cotton**. Jan. 12: The **Radiators**, the ne plus ultra of bar bands, hail from New Orleans, the ne plus ultra of party cities. Jan. 13: With a love of power pop and a talent for New Wave and Brill Building songwriting, the **Smithereens** were once, during a brief eighties chart run, the pride of their native New Jersey.



The Holmes Brothers pay a visit to Joe's Pub this week.

BEACON THEATRE
Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—Jan. 11: The Canadian pop star **Bryan Adams**, who has been a presence on the charts since the early eighties, when songs like "Cuts Like a Knife," "Straight from the Heart," and "Run to You" first made him a household name.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Jan. 10: **Kill Hannah** sounds like it should be a misogynistic metal band, but it is not. Rather, it is a slick glam-goth rock group from Chicago that draws on a number of musical styles (such as hardcore and dream pop) for its teen-friendly music. With the **Pink Spiders**, a Nashville trio that delivers unabashedly retro garage punk with cartoonish aplomb. Jan. 12: The singer-songwriter **Ron Sexsmith.** Jan. 13: Back in the eighties, the **dB's** played jangly power pop. The band called it quits near the end of that decade, but its original members are touring again.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Jan. 16: The **Holmes Brothers** have been delivering blues, soul, gospel, and R. & B. for decades, and their time has been well spent. They remain capable of awesome achievements: they can make even Cheap Trick sound holy, as they do with their inspired cover of "I Want You to Want Me," on their new album, "State of Grace."

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN
Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Jan. 16-18: From his humble beginnings as Bette Midler's accompanist in piano bars and bathhouses, **Barry Manilow** has become an adult-contemporary balladeer par excellence.

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Jan. 11: **Looker**, a local band with three girls and a guy, celebrates the release of its self-produced début, "Born Too Late," a collection of pure-hearted garage rock. Jan. 13: **Georgie James.** Recently, the drummer John Davis, formerly of the band Q and Not U, teamed up with the vocalist Laura Burhenn and a few other backing musicians to experiment with some organ-fuelled indie rock. Jan. 14: The New York City outfit **24-7 Spyz**, peers and late-eighties Black Rock Coalition compatriots of Vernon Reid's band Living Colour, were pioneers in mixing soul, funk, and hardcore styles, paving the way for the likes of Korn and Limp Bizkit.

PIANOS
158 Ludlow St. (212-505-3733)—Jan. 10: The **Cold War Kids**, a quartet of young men from Los Angeles, play rock songs full of chiming guitar work, jittery drumming, and barroom piano playing. The front man, Nathan Willet, yowls like a preacher (the band members met in an evangelical college), spinning stories of alcoholic desperation, petty criminality, and other downbeat subjects. The music, though, is anything but. The Kids are in the midst of a bicoastal residency, playing Wednesday nights at venues in N.Y.C. and Fridays in their home town.

"SINGERS OVER MANHATTAN"
Jan. 12-13: The legendary country-music outlaw **Willie Nelson** sings the blues, something he's learned about firsthand (that little dispute with the I.R.S. back in the early nineties comes to mind), joined by the trumpeter **Wynton Marsalis** and others. (Allen Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500.)

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
Jan. 13: **Hassan Hakmoun**, a native of Marrakech, plays Gnawa trance music, a genre created by black Muslim slaves who were brought to Morocco from West and Central Africa, most likely in the late sixteenth century. Considered a chosen people of sorts within Islam, the Gnawa adopted as their forefather Bilal, the Prophet Muhammad's first muezzin. Hakmoun, who's lived in the U.S. since 1987, has recorded on Peter Gabriel's Real World label and performed with the Kronos Quartet and DJ Spooky. His main instrument is a three-stringed bass lute known as a *sintir*, and here he'll be joined by his brother, the vocalist and dancer **Abdu Rrahim Hakmoun**, and the guitarist and percussionist **Brahim Fribgane.** The program opens with Berber music performed by Fribgane and **Abderahim Boutat.** (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Jan. 10-13: **Jason Moran** and the Bandwagon, which is **Tarus Mateen**, on bass, and **Nasheet Waits**, on drums. Moran shakes

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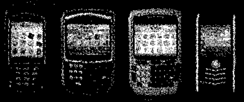

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up the traditional concept of the piano trio by incorporating hip-hop rhythms, recorded samples, and other postmodern ploys and embracing a repertoire that ranges from the stride pianist James P. Johnson to the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Jan. 9-14: The **Crusaders,** one of the original bands to score with a jazz-plus-funk formula. These days, the founding members, **Joe Sample,** on keyboards, and **Wilton Felder,** on saxophone, are backed by fully seasoned players including the session superstar **Steve Gadd,** on drums, and **Ray Parker, Jr.,** of "Ghostbusters" fame, on guitar.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound murals, and, starting Jan. 16, the stage and screen legend **Rita Moreno,** who has a Tony, an Emmy, a Grammy, and an Oscar to her credit.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Jan. 9-14: A frequent presence as sideman for leaders who crave bebop drumming in its most polished state, **Lewis Nash** takes the reins of his own small group, which includes the saxophonist **Jimmy Greene,** the trumpeter **Jeremy Pelt,** the pianist **Renee Rosnes,** and the bassist **Peter Washington.** Jan. 15: The **New Jazz Composers Octet** celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr., Day by premièring a new composition written in honor of the late civil-rights leader. They'll joined by the saxophonist **Billy Harper,** a sixties-era heavyweight who is still going strong.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Jan. 10-14: **Nicholas Payton,** a trumpeter with a huge sound and an expansive temperament that embraces the traditional and the contemporary, leads a compact ensemble. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—The noble independent label Maxjazz presents a week of its standout mainstream artists, including the vocalist **Nancy King,** on Jan. 10, who will be accompanied by the pianist **Geoffrey Keezer** and his trio; the saxophonist **Steve Wilson** and his quartet, on Jan. 11; the pianist **Eric Reed's** quartet, on Jan. 12; and the trumpeter **Terell Stafford's** quintet, on Jan. 13.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Jan. 10: The lithe Canadian chanteuse **Holly Cole** makes a rare appearance. Jan. 11: The trumpeter **Terence Blanchard** may be best known as the composer for Spike Lee's films, but he remains an agile post-bop soloist whose commanding tone determines the mood of his tensile bands. Later on Jan. 11: **Burnt Sugar,** the expansive improvisational ensemble conducted by the music journalist Greg Tate. Jan. 12: A triple-threat talent, the Cameroon native **Richard Bona** sings, composes, and, as he's proved from his work with such artists as Joe Zawinul and Mike Stern, plays a mean electric bass.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Jan. 9-14: **Fly,** a trio consisting of the saxophonist **Mark Turner,** the bassist **Larry Grenadier,** and the drummer **Jeff Ballard,** keeps the action as democratic as possible. One refreshing result is that group interaction tends to trump solo improvisation. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s"** features work by ten Weimar-era artists, including Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Ludwig Meidner. Through Feb. 19. ♦ **"Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurelton Hall: An Artist's Country Estate."** Through May 20. ♦ **"Americans in Paris, 1860-1900."** An enjoyable show of questing Yankees abroad—among them Whistler, Cassatt, Eakins, Sargent, and Homer. Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Nan Kempner: American Chic."** "There is no such thing as a chic American woman," Diana Vreeland said. "The one exception is Nan Kempner." The late Mrs. Thomas L. Kempner donated generously to the Costume Institute, and an edited version of her staggering wardrobe is on display (along with Warhol's silk screen of her face). Racks and shelves crammed with garments, installed as a backdrop to outfits on mannequins, border on the disturbingly ostentatious. But there are deliciously oh-là-là moments, too, from the frothy lace Jacques Griffe ball gown, worn at the socialite's 1949 coming-out party, to a pair of Saint Laurent evening coats in silk faille—poufy, sculptural yellow from 1983 and tightly tailored pink from 2001. Emblematic accessories include a Judith Leiber bag made from a single nautilus shell bound in red leather. Through March 4. ♦ **"Sean Scully: Wall of Light."** Through Jan. 15. ♦ **"Coaxing the Spirits to Dance: Art of the Papuan Gulf."** Through Sept. 3. ♦ **"Discovering Tutankhamun: The Photographs of Harry Burton."** Through April 29. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—The city that never sleeps is the setting, and partly the subject, of the multimedia artist Doug Aitken's first U.S. public project, **"Sleepwalkers."** A series of moving pictures depicting five different characters—an office worker (played by Tilda Swinton), a businessman (Donald Sutherland), an electrician (Seu Jorge), a postal worker (Chan Marshall), and a bike messenger (Ryan Donowho)—making their way through New York after dark will be projected on the museum's exterior walls. Opens Jan. 16; nightly from 5 to 10. ♦ **"Manet and the Execution of Maximilian."** Through Jan. 29. ♦ **"Brice Marden: A Retrospective of Paintings and Drawings."** Through Jan. 15. ♦ **"OMA in Beijing: China Central Television Headquarters by Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren."** Through Feb. 26. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and Memory"** includes works by Zurbarán, Murillo, Velázquez, and Cotán, among many others. Through March 28. ♦ **"Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York."** Through Jan. 21. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005."** Through Feb. 11. ♦ All roads in modernism lead back to Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy in **"Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Picasso and American Art."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Photography and the Self: The Legacy of F. Holland Day."** Through March 11. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005."** Through Jan. 21. ♦ **"Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford."** Through Jan. 28. ♦ **"Ron Mueck."** Through Feb. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—**"A City on Paper: Saul Steinberg's New York."** Through March 25. ♦ Photographs of fashionable progenitors like Cab Calloway, Jackie Robinson, and the milliner Willard Winter set the stage for what follows in the multimedia exhibition **"Black Style Now."** Clothing, hats, sneakers, jewelry, and accessories are exhibited under headings like "Hip-Hop Style," "The Birth of Urban Brands," and "Ghetto Fabulous." Movies like "Shaft" play alongside music videos while a hip-hop soundtrack thumps in the background. Despite the apparent chaos, "Black Style Now" delivers a cogent narrative that reminds us that these superficial signifiers are rooted in social facts, underscored by quotations like Russell Simmons's "I never wore dirty sneakers. Coming from the ghetto, you just didn't do that." Through Feb. 19. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

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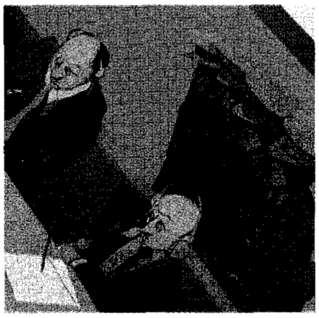
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK THE MORAL LAW

Yet another epic movie about the Holocaust might seem redundant, but the recent conference, in Tehran, of Holocaust deniers, anti-Semites, and other fools has made the truth necessary once again. "Verdict on Auschwitz," at the Quad Cinema, is the greatest German film on the subject. Made for television in 1993 by Rolf Bickel and Dietrich Wagner, the movie revisits the long trial of Auschwitz officers that began in Frankfurt in 1963 and stretched on for twenty months. The trial itself, with its three hundred and sixty witnesses, was a reconstruction of history, and the movie provides not only substantial pieces of testimony from survivors but an extraordinary variety of documentary evidence—plans for the crematoriums, bureaucratic records of executions, photographs, notebooks, and speeches, including an audio recording of a speech by Heinrich Himmler in which he makes explicit reference to the extermination of the Jews. There are heroes, too: the determined German prosecutors and an eloquent survivor named Hermann Langbein, whose ardor for justice remained strong thirty years after the trial.



RICCARDO VECCHIO

—*David Denby*

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Stan Douglas: Inconsolable Memories."** Through March 18. ♦ **"Africa Comics."** Through March 18. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

BENJAMIN EDWARDS
Edwards is known for his paintings of cities and overbuilt suburbs, which incorporate computer design techniques and dramatic linear perspective in the vein of Perugino or Raphael. Now he's turned to Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1920 dystopian novel, "We," to consider a postindustrial landscape gone to seed. "We," the exhibition, includes paintings with shadowy android figures and texts and logos scrolling by like stock-ticker symbols or news-channel updates. The video-game energy and the proliferation of objects competing for viewers' attention make one long for Edwards's chilly, depopulated scenes, in which his considerable compositional skills were displayed with more economy and precision. Through Jan. 13. (Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444.)

GIULIO PAOLINI
Paolini gets a big push in this four-venue show (continuing at Lambert's and Goodman's Paris outposts). An original practitioner of Arte Povera, he also veers into minimalism, using not only "poor" materials but as few of them as possible. At Lambert in Chelsea, squares and cubes are elegantly constructed and deconstructed in plaster and Plexiglas. A simple wall drawing of a repeated square is like Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man," stripped of the figure and reduced to its bare geometric essentials. Uptown, at Marian Goodman, a chair sits at the center of a rectangular armature, suggesting a kind of imaginative, sculptural linear perspective. There's something very Italian about all of this, and Paolini seems to be referencing the Quattrocento as much as the sixties. Through Jan. 13. (Lambert, 564 W. 25th St. 212-242-3611; Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160.)

Short List

CHARLES JONES: Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010. Through Jan. 13. **MARILYN MINTER:** Salon 94, at 12 E. 94th St. 646-672-9212. Through Jan. 20. **SIGMAR POLKE:** Michael Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623. Through Jan. 13. **FRED SANDBACK:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through Jan. 20. **SAUL STEINBERG:** Baumgold, 74 E. 79th St. 212-861-7338. Through Feb. 10. **"ROY LICHTENSTEIN WORKS ON PAPER: A RETROSPECTIVE":** James Goodman, 41 E. 57th St. 212-593-3737. Through Jan. 15.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

SUE DE BEER
Teen-agers didn't exist as a sociological category in Puritan New England, but the devoted teenophile de Beer doesn't let that stop her. Where previous installations mined the sex-, drugs-, and fantasy-fuelled lives of adolescents behind closed bedroom doors, "The Quickening" imagines a more repressed, authoritarian era. The shag carpet and beanbags remain; the video is saturated with gothic horror-movie imagery and psychosexual overtones. But there's something more sober about this work, perhaps in its invocation of Jonathan Edwards's 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In musing about sin—as well as about fashion and raging hormones—de Beer seems, one might almost say, more mature. Through Jan. 10. (Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889.)

MICHAEL FULLERTON
"A Rake's Progress," the eighteenth-century series of engravings by Hogarth, narrates the dissolute life and eventual downfall of a cad-about-town. Fullerton, from Scotland, takes this as a (very) loose reference point for two huge silk screens that show a woman giving birth. Given their size and content, these become the focus of the show, which is snarkily titled "Get Over Yourself." (The rake isn't doing so well after all.) Other elements in this aloof and ironic morality tale include abstract sculptures, and small oil portraits (of a spy, an actress, a crime victim) executed in a green-brown palette that is equal parts Old Master and thrift store. Through Jan. 13. (Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770.)

CANDIDA HÖFER
Höfer's enormous color photographs of empty public spaces are as formal, objective, and inert as the pictures in real-estate ads. They are not meant to excite, only describe, and that they do beautifully, especially in this 2005 series set at the Louvre. Here, the architecture and decoration of long galleries seen in diminishing perspective, like marble-paved roads to the past, tend to render even the art insignificant; people would be rude intrusions. Unlike Thomas Struth, Höfer isn't interested in the public life of these magnificent spaces, but there's a nagging sense that her pictures of the absolute height of civilized culture are also about the absolute end of it. Through Jan. 13. (Sonnabend, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-627-1018.)

KIMSOOJA
Time, presence, and environment are integral to Kimsooja's work. Earlier videos found her sitting in meditative stillness on the sidewalks of bustling metropolises, letting rivers of humanity flow around her. A video shown recently uptown, at the Project, was shot in Hawaii and focussed on the space between treetops and sky. The iris prints on paper here come from the same project. Made with the camera shutter open, images of sky, trees, and clouds become blurred, landing somewhere between an Impressionist painting and the view of a landscape from a speeding train. Like much of Kimsooja's work, the pictures are simple but delicately thoughtful. Through Jan. 13. (Peter Blum, 526 W. 29th St. 212-244-6055.)

EDGAR MARTINS
For his U.S. début, the U.K.-based photographer shows color work from two series made in Portugal in 2005. Pictures of a smoke-filled forest in the wake of a fire are so gorgeously atmospheric that they look like they were made on a film set with pumped-in fog; cue the knights on horseback. Even more cinematic are photographs of a beach at night, its trampled sand brightly illuminated while the sea beyond is pitch black. Conflating artifice and naturalism, Martins treats the beach as an empty soundstage on which a phalanx of poles, a stray umbrella, or a solitary balloon seller can take on a haunting, momentous presence. Through Jan. 13. (Cuningham, 541 W. 25th St. 212-242-2772.)

STEPHEN ROACH
The color photographs in Roach's first New York solo show are constructs—some believably seamless digital jigsaws, others obviously pieced-together photocollages—that seem less concerned with literal truth than with a picture's poetic possibilities. Many of the images are panoramic diptychs or triptychs, linking, for instance, a man on the telephone and a woman gazing out a window, or a sad young woman, a full-blown rose, and a hazy reflection in a mirror. The dreamlike logic of Roach's best pictures doesn't need interpretation: a pale nude, her head wrapped in a bright-red scarf, stands in a green, wooded landscape that swoops off into the distance, as if she had only imagined it. Through Jan. 13. (Meislin, 526 W. 26th St. 212-627-2552.)

PATTI SMITH
The poet and performer is also a photographer; her work is as allusive and idiosyncratic as her lyrics, and far more romantic. Most of the small black-and-white photographs in her current show (all of which began as Polaroids) were made while she was on the road, and travel provides their key metaphors: the road, the river, the distant mountain, the ready horse. All these sites are significant (Rimbaud's pitted country road, and the river that Virginia Woolf drowned in), and many suggest that travel involves transcendence. Gravestones and statuary are recurring images: Blake,

Brancusi, Yeats, Shelley, and Sontag are buried here, along with Smith's punk audacity. In its place is a richer, darker vision that stops just this side of sentimentality. Through Jan. 13. (Robert Miller, 524 W. 26th St. 212-366-4774.)

MIKE WOMACK

From the front, Womack's ingenious construction looks like one panel of a fabulous disco pyramid, with hundreds of small mirrors glittering in a concentric square pattern. Walk around to the back of the open frame, though, and the real cleverness is revealed: all the little refracted scraps of color come from a goofy landscape made of vegetal piles of green garden hose, topiaries of orange Cheetos, clouds of blue rubber gloves, flower beds of red plastic stakes, and the like. The perceptual trick of turning Crayola-colored dross into Pop-art treasure, and the intricacy of the execution, is a delight. Through Jan. 13. (ZieherSmith, 533 W. 25th St. 212-229-1088.)

Short List

ROZ CHAST: Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Through Feb. 10. **JACK HALLBERG / MIGUEL LUCIANO:** Cue, 511 W. 25th St. 212-206-3583. Through Jan. 27. **ROBERT IRWIN:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-929-7000. Through Jan. 27. **ELLSWORTH KELLY:** Marks, 523 W. 24th St., 522 W. 22nd St., and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200. Through Jan. 27. **ANDREW MOORE:** Richardson, 535 W. 22nd St. 646-230-9610. Through Jan. 27. **DAN PETERMAN:** Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000. Through Jan. 20.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

HELEN MIRRA

The sculptures in Mirra's exhibition, titled "Break Camp," rely on scavenged resources—specifically, lumber from European shipping pallets and pinecones from the Grunewald forest, in Berlin. Her blunt but eloquent assemblages are accompanied by three wall works, narrow strips of gray-green fabric onto which are typed fragments of an index she made for a deer-hunting manual ("breastbone, 99 / bucksaw, 129 / bullet-action, 37-8"). These simple, cross-pollinating parts layer minimalism with affective history, and tie language back into the physical relations of live forest with waste wood, beauty with violence. Through Jan. 20. (Freeman, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-5154.)

"DRAWING THROUGH IT"

A somewhat listless iteration of a potentially exhilarating idea, this show of works on paper from the seventies to the present examines legacies of minimalism and geometric abstraction. Cool, mathematical mark-making predominates, and it's interesting to see that newer works acquit themselves most dynamically. Alice Maher's large drawing of continuous loops suggests a swag of chain mail while maintaining its integrity as an essay in 2-D problem-solving, and James Siena's small, colorful pieces balance freehand enthusiasm with methodical pursuit of preset patterns. With Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, Dorothea Rockburne, Richard Tuttle, and Terry Winters, among others. Through Jan. 13. (Nolan, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-925-6190.)

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

VIRGINIE BARRÉ

The Sioux and the Hopi seem unlikely collaborators for Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. But Barré grafts them together in a series of gouache and marker drawings, accompanied by an ensemble of featureless, blanket-clad sculptural figures. A tiny warrior on horseback picks his way along the edge of a Barcelona chair; tribal maidens regard Bauhaus typography; the army blankets enshrouding bundle-like bodies are decorated with geometric patterns, splicing indigenous beadwork with avant-garde design. Barré's idea may not transcend the conceit of disparate pairings, but the works on paper, in particular, are crisply and confidently drawn. Through Jan. 14. (Parker's Box, 193 Grand St. 718-388-2882.)

DENNIS KAISER

As if a now annoying, now compelling mind had emptied itself out onto the walls, Kaiser's show is chockablock with doodly drawings, paintings, and collages. The ensemble is titled "The Idea That Things Only Happen Once Used to Bother Me." Accordingly, preoccupations emerge: baseball players, faux wood grain, girls in bikinis, grids of impastoed string. Other events remain stubbornly singular, like the ambient audio track featuring a woman's voice rambling about art, or the watercolor in which a flowering tree grows from the crotch of a supine Abraham Lincoln. Through Jan. 14. (Outrageous Look, 103 Broadway, at Berry St. 718-218-7656.)

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

"Sleeping Beauty"'s rich, magical story, known by all, illustrates both the struggle between good and evil and the evolution of a girl. We see Princess Aurora grow from the confident and delicate adolescent of the famous "Rose Adagio," in Act I, into a woman in love by the end. In the ballet's second and final week at City Ballet, the transformation will be undertaken—for the first time—by the up-and-comers Sterling Hyltin and Megan Fairchild, as well as by Wendy Whelan and the infinitely self-possessed Ashley Bouder. Next week, the company presents the first of its mixed bills, with a selection of Balanchine's Stravinsky ballets. ♦ Jan. 10 at 7:30, Jan. 11-12 at 8, Jan. 13 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 14 at 3: "The Sleeping Beauty." ♦ Jan. 16 at 7:30: "Agon," "Monumentum pro Gesualdo," "Movements for Piano and Orchestra," "Duo Concertant," and "Symphony in Three Movements." (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Through Feb. 25.)

DANCE ON CAMERA FESTIVAL

The events of the final week of the festival, which is anchored by a series of programs at the Walter Reade Theatre, include a presentation of the filmed version of Mark Morris's opera-ballet "Dido and Aeneas" and a screening of Gene Kelly's grand experiment "Invitation to the Dance," from 1956. Kelly, working in his more classical vein, meant to create a film for the general public entirely out of dance, pantomime, and animation. He used famous ballet dancers of the time and pranced around with animated characters; the studio was perplexed, and the movie fizzled. The screening of "Dido" is followed by a discussion with Morris and the director of the film, Barbara Willis Sweete, moderated by Joan Acocella. (Lincoln Center and other locations. 212-875-5600. Jan. 13 at 2 and 4. For a complete schedule, visit www.dancefilmsassn.org.)

COMPANY EAST

The Japanese troupe brings its visually dramatic, Noh-based production of "Medea" to the Annex at La Mama. (74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Jan. 11-13 at 7:30 and Jan. 14 at 2:30 and 7:30.)

COMPLEXIONS

In a weeklong stint at the Joyce, the contemporary-ballet troupe adds intriguing guest choreographers to its usual formula, which consists of Dwight Rhoden's attractive but dense choreography, Desmond Richardson's knockout solos, and the company's sleek, fervid dancing. Richardson performs an intimate solo created for him by the actor (and Garth Fagan-trained dancer) Taye Diggs. The former company member Jodie Gates contributes a structured-improvisation quartet, and Rhoden offers a first look at his new Marvin Gaye suite, "Chapters." (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 9-10 at 7:30, Jan. 11-12 at 8, Jan. 13 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 14 at 2 and 7:30.)

JEAN ISAACS SAN DIEGO DANCE THEATRE

Back in town for the first time since a well-received 2001 appearance, the athletic eight-member company presents a program of four contrasting new works, three of them by Isaacs. In the world première of "Her It Age," Isaacs pairs a highly personal exploration of aging with Italian-American songs from her childhood, while the character-driven vignettes of "Three Quartets and More" are set to Kronos Quartet recordings of music by Steve Reich. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Jan. 11-13 at 8:30.)

TABLES FOR TWO
CAFÉ CLUNY

284 W. 12th St. (212-255-6900)—It's not entirely clear whether this restaurant is named after the French monastery or the Métro stop, but, in either case, the more relevant names are Odeon and Café Luxembourg (Lynn Wagenknecht and her partners are behind all three enterprises). The space is much smaller, but the fare is about what you'd find at the other two restaurants, and that linkage, apparently, is more than enough of a draw: Cluny opened its doors in October and was quickly overrun.

Appropriately, the décor is all about pedigrees and taxonomies, both zoological and anthropological. The walls are adorned with mounted butterflies and a rather unsettling array of stuffed birds and fish. Juxtaposed with the taxidermic displays are portraits of various West Village neighbors who are friendly with the management—among them Diane von Furstenberg, Ian Schrager, and Wagenknecht's ex-husband, the restaurateur Keith McNally. The rest of the setup—the clunky wineglasses, the uncomfortable café-style chairs, the cute waitresses in striped T-shirts—feels slightly overstudied in its simplicity.

The menu isn't so much well edited as abridged. Here's the requisite beet-and-goat-cheese salad, there's the roasted chicken, and there, of course, are the steak frites. It's all well executed (with the exception of some soggy fries), but somehow it feels lazy. It's also very rich, from the lardons festooning the thickly oiled frisée salads to the seared foie gras splayed over the short ribs. Food like this wants to be eaten slowly and savored, but the dishes come out very fast, and you can't quite keep up with the conveyor belt. By the time Al Green's "Tired of Being Alone" plays for the second time, you're past tired, and approaching glutted. Fortunately, the desserts are a high point: the ginger-yogurt cheesecake with mint offers a welcome jolt of flavor, and the profiteroles—ice cream stuffed inside perfectly crisp puffs of pastry—are good enough to inspire momentary infatuation with the place. A pity, then, that your plate is whisked away before you've finished. "The next reservation has actually arrived," the hostess explains, in a stage whisper. "Didn't they tell you that we'd need the table back?" (Open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Entrées $22-$28.)

—*Kate Julian*

Andrew Moore's new show of photographs at the Yancey Richardson gallery, in Chelsea, includes "Motherland, Kiev" (2003).

DANCES BY PHIL GROSSER
The Philadelphia-based choreographer brings well-constructed dances and a company of eight to the Joyce SoHo. "Four Songs by Henry Purcell" is Mark Morris-like, not only in its use of Baroque music but also in its pastoral lyricism, complemented by a touch of irreverence. A quick, bright duet to Bach and a blues-tinged solo to Wayne Shorter flank the première of "Embers," which draws an innocence-to-maturity theme from Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor. (155 Mercer St. 212-334-7479. Jan. 11-13 at 8.)

CLARE BYRNE DANCE
"Rounds, the First Last Dance, or the Last First Dance, or an Ordination," the protracted title Byrne has chosen for her latest work, refers to the format of the in-the-round piece and to Byrne's long-standing interest in the sacraments. This church service, however, moves to the thrashing rock of the band Hot Young Priest (led by Byrne's sister Mary), performed live. Thrusting, caressing, and climbing, the dancers turn a serious game of Twister into a visceral and polymorphous vision of spirituality. (Dance New Amsterdam, 280 Broadway, at Chambers St. 212-279-4200. Jan. 11-13 at 8 and Jan. 14 at 3.)

LAURA PETERSON CHOREOGRAPHY
"I Love Dan Flavin" is an homage both to the fluorescent-tube artist and to visions of technological utopia, circa 1980. As they impassively execute precise patterns in chic tracksuits to recordings by the techno band Kraftwerk, the dancers resemble catwalk models, a drill team of zombies, robots on the fritz. All this retro kitsch is delicious—if hard to take for forty-five minutes. (Dixon Place, 258 Bowery, near Houston St. 212-219-0736. Jan. 12-13 at 8. Through Jan. 27.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The Met begins an abbreviated week of performances with a revival of the durable Zeffirelli production of **"La Traviata,"** with Hei-Kyung Hong, Wookyung Kim, and Charles Taylor in the leading roles; Carlo Rizzi conducts. (Jan. 10 and Jan. 13 at 8.) ♦ Anna Netrebko, the starring attraction in Bellini's **"I Puritani,"** may not have quite the silvery fioritura of such legends as Sills or Sutherland. But she remains the world's most thrilling soprano, singing the role of Elvira Walton with honest feeling, an awesome dynamic range, and a command of legato phrasing that approaches the limits of human possibility. Also with Eric Cutler, Franco Vassallo, and John Relyea; Patrick Summers. (Jan. 11 at 7:30.) ♦ Julie Taymor's entertaining production of **"Die Zauberflöte,"** in the complete German version, is performed with an impressive cast that includes Lisa Milne, Erika Miklósa, Matthew Polenzani, Rodion Pogossov (a winning Papageno), and Eike Wilm Schulte; James Levine, who likes to serve up Mozart rich and strong, conducts. (Jan. 12 at 8.) ♦ Plácido Domingo takes the title role in the world-première performances of Tan Dun's **"The First Emperor,"** an epic tale of ancient China directed by Zhang Yimou. Also with the estimable Elizabeth Futral, Paul Groves, and Michelle deYoung; Tan, an experienced and incisive conductor, is on the podium. (Jan. 13 at 1:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000. **Note:** After the performance of Jan. 13, the company will be on hiatus until Jan. 22.)

DICAPO OPERA
New York's third professional company, which has been carrying a torch for Puccini this season, offers a double bill of two of the composer's earliest extant works—**"Le Villi,"** his first opera, and **"Messa di Gloria,"** his only foray into sacred music—in danced versions staged by the choreographers Nilas Martins and Stephen Pier, respectively. (Dicapo Opera Theatre, 184 E. 76th St. 212-288-9438. Jan. 12-13 at 8 and Jan. 14 at 4.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Four decades ago, a fiery young cellist, Jacqueline du Pré, made her name with a stunning recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto. Now the young Alisa Weilerstein, another intense and persuasive performer, takes up the mantle, offering the piece to Philharmonic audiences in a concert conducted by du Pré's old friend Zubin Mehta, who also leads Bruckner's Symphony No. 7. (Jan. 11 at 7:30 and Jan. 13 at 8.) ♦ Lorin Maazel takes the reins in a one-time-only collaborative concert with Symphonica Toscanini, an ensemble of young European musicians who have made Maazel their music director. The group will back the soprano Renée Fleming in arias by Puccini, Cilea, Bellini, and Rossini; the two ensembles join forces in what will surely be a powerhouse performance of Tchaikovsky's "Francesca da Rimini." (Jan. 16 at 7:30.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM: "IMPERIAL VIENNA"
The musical tradition of Austria that gave us Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn really began in the late seventeenth century, when a close-knit generation of native composers transcended their Italian influences and established a national sound. In a program devised by the early-brass specialist Greg Ingles, the group performs works by Biber, Rittler, Vejvanovsky, and Weichlein, as well as two pieces by Johann Heinrich Schmelzer. With Ingles on trombone, Robert Mealy on violin, and Eric Milnes on organ. (Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, Lexington Ave. at 66th St. 212-717-9246. Jan. 12 at 8.)

CARNEGIE HALL CHORAL WORKSHOP
This noble venture began with the choral icon Robert Shaw, who offered instruction in the singing and interpretation of a major work once a year to choral directors from across the country. This year's director is Helmuth Rilling, a renowned German master of this craft, who winds up the session with a public performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion offered with the Orchestra of St. Luke's. (212-247-7800. Jan. 13 at 7.)

THE MET ORCHESTRA
James Levine once more climbs the craggy rocks of the German masterworks with his versatile and indefatigable band. This time it's Brahms's Third Symphony and Beethoven's Violin Concerto (with Christian Tetzlaff), along with the world première of Charles Wuorinen's "Theologoumenon," a work inspired by a religious text by an ancient Greek scribe. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Jan. 14 at 3.)

RECITALS

BARGEMUSIC
The violinist Mark Peskanov, the barge's gregarious music director, takes three young colleagues—the violinist Yosuke Kawasaki, the violist Maurycy Banaszek, and the cellist Edward Arron—through Beethoven's Op. 18 string quartets. Jan. 11-12 at 7:30: The Quartets Nos. 1-3. ♦ Jan. 13 at 7:30: The Quartets Nos. 4-6. ♦ Jan. 14 at 4: The performers offer all six works in a Sunday-afternoon concert. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

COMPOSERS GUILD OF NEW JERSEY: MUSIC BY CHARLES WUORINEN
The former Rutgers University professor, whose work is on offer this week by the Met Orchestra, will also be featured in a more intimate concert at Christ and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Some of the city's most admired new-music hands—including the soprano Lucy Shelton, the baritone Thomas Meglioranza, the violinist Mark Steinberg, and the pianist Alan Feinberg—perform in a program featuring the Sonata for Guitar and Piano and the New York première of "Fenton Songs II" (with the original "Fenton Songs" preceding it). (120 W. 69th St. Jan. 11 at 8. A donation is suggested.)

EIGHTH BLACKBIRD
The young, impetuous new-music group, whose artistry can animate works on the spectrum between the funky and the nerdy, celebrates the release of their new compact disk, "Strange Imaginary Animals," with two concerts at the Kitchen; the bill of fare includes pieces by Jennifer Higdon, Gordon Fitzell, and the illustrious Steven Mackey. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Jan. 11-12 at 8.)

GEORGE LONDON FOUNDATION RECITAL
The soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and the baritone Russell Braun, two young Metropolitan Opera standouts, sing a recital in which they will be accompanied by their respective spouses, the pianists Serouj Kradjian and Carolyn Maule. The manuscript of one of the works on the program, Debussy's cycle "Fêtes Galantes," is in the Morgan Library and Museum's collection and will be displayed in the lobby of Gilder Lehrman Hall, its intimate new concert space. (225 Madison Ave. 212-877-6347. Jan. 14 at 4.)

CALEFAX
A very hip Dutch quintet of reed players—whose instruments range from oboe to saxophone—comes to the Frick Collection's elegant confines to perform a concert offering arrangements of works by Ockeghem, Byrd, Debussy (the "Suite Bergamasque"), Ravel, and Conlon Nancarrow. (1 E. 70th St. 212-547-0715. Jan. 14 at 5.)

OPEN END
Andrew Waggoner, a composer based at Syracuse University, is a gifted practitioner of a complex but dramatic and vividly colored style. Also a violinist, he joins two unusually adept contemporary-music specialists (the cellist Caroline Stinson and the pianist Molly Morkoski) at the Tenri Cultural Institute for a program that features Elliott Carter's Sonata for Cello and Piano, John Harbison's Suite for Solo Cello, and the world première of Waggoner's own "Tales from Home," a piano trio. (43A W. 13th St. 212-645-2800. Jan. 14 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

ABDUCTION
Chris Sheridan and Patty Kim directed this documentary, about a thirteen-year-old girl who was abducted in Japan by North Korean agents in 1977. Opening Jan. 12. (Cinema Village.)

AGNES MARTIN: WITH MY BACK TO THE WORLD
A documentary about the artist, directed by Mary Lance. Opening Jan. 10. (Film Forum.)

ALPHA DOG
Nick Cassavetes directed this crime drama, based on the real-life story of the young drug dealer Jesse James Hollywood. Starring Emile Hirsch and Justin Timberlake. Opening Jan. 12. (In wide release.)

ARTHUR AND THE INVISIBLES
A blend of live action and animation, directed by Luc Besson, about a boy who hunts for treasure in the land of the tiny Invisibles. With Freddie Highmore, Mia Farrow, and the voices of Snoop Dogg and Madonna. Opening Jan. 12. (In wide release.)

GOD GREW TIRED OF US
Christopher Quinn directed this documentary, about three young men from Sudan who attempt to remake their lives in the United States. Opening Jan. 12. (Sunshine Cinema.)

KIKI SMITH: SQUATTING THE PALACE
A documentary about the artist, directed by Vivien Bittencourt and Vincent Katz. Opening Jan. 10. (Film Forum.)

STOMP THE YARD
A drama, directed by Sylvain White, about a college student and dancer (Columbus Short) who is recruited by two competing fraternities. Opening Jan. 12. (In wide release.)

TEARS OF THE BLACK TIGER
Reviewed below in Now Playing. In Thai. Opening Jan. 12. (Film Forum.)

VERDICT ON AUSCHWITZ
Rolf Bickel and Dietrich Wagner directed this documentary, about the 1963-65 trial in Frankfurt of twenty-two S.S. members. In German. Opening Jan. 12. (Quad Cinema.)

NOW PLAYING

BLOOD DIAMOND
A rousing, old-fashioned romantic adventure tale set against the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1999. Djimon Hounsou is a fisherman whose young son is abducted by the thuggish Revolutionary United Front and turned into a killer. Hounsou, forced by the R.U.F. to work in the diamond fields, finds and hides a very big stone. Leonardo DiCaprio, looking and sounding tougher than in the past, is a cynical diamond smuggler who wants to get hold of it, and Jennifer Connelly, flirtatious and avid for once, is a danger-junkie magazine reporter who cozies up to DiCaprio in order to find out how diamonds are smuggled out of the country and sold to Europeans for arms money that fuels the endless war. These three take turns using, helping, and half-trusting one another as young killers rampage through the country firing AK-47s from the backs of pickup trucks. The director, Edward Zwick, stays poised on the edge of popular romance, and that turns out to be a good place to be; he does serious work there, pull-

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK SPRING FLING

Had the playwright Frank Wedekind been alive during the rise of National Socialism in his native Germany, he would surely have been extinguished, along with the morally reprehensible characters who were his mind's great love. Born in 1864, Wedekind lived among the painters, writers, and actors whose various skills he sought to incorporate in his anti-naturalistic theatre. His Expressionism suggests elements of our Living Theatre, not to mention our fine contemporary auteur Richard Foreman: Wedekind's is a theatre of ideas, not to say critiques, of the status quo, dressed up in skewered décor. Just now, Wedekind is finding a new audience with the musical adaptation of his first major play, "Spring Awakening," from 1891. In this tale of young love made perverse through the twisted contrivances of the adult world, Wedekind wrote perhaps one of the first anti-establishment pieces of drama. He took his themes even further with his Lulu plays, which were the basis for G. W. Pabst's 1929 film starring Louise Brooks—a masterpiece about the hard joy and cold tragedy of modernism.

RUTH GWILY

—*Hilton Als*

ing back from the obvious and digging deeper into Africa's troubles.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/11/06.) (In wide release.)

CHARLOTTE'S WEB

A blend of live action and computer animation, this adaptation of the classic children's novel by E. B. White, a longtime contributor to this magazine, is inoffensive but uninspired. As Fern, the farm girl who rescues a runt piglet and makes it her pet, Dakota Fanning is self-consciously cute, and the director, Gary Winick, seems far more interested in the actors who lend their voices to the animated animals, including Dominic Scott Kay as Wilbur the pig, Julia Roberts as Charlotte the spider, and Steve Buscemi as Templeton the rat. But these computerized creatures are given the Hollywood frat-house style of snappy dialogue that is endemic to recent children's films but utterly alien to White's homespun world, and the farmers' lives and livelihoods, developed with such fine texture in the book, are here reduced to generic picture postcards. Even adulterated and underpowered, however, the story provides a kick: who can keep a dry eye during Wilbur and Charlotte's farewell?—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

CHILDREN OF MEN

The Britain of 2027, as prophesied by Alfonso Cuarón in his new film, looks ominously close to the Britain of today—crowded, gray, and anxious. Two new crises have arisen: first, immigrants are being rounded up and caged like beasts, and second, nobody, either in Britain or elsewhere, is able to give birth. The world is infertile, and therefore doomed; when a young woman falls pregnant, everybody wants a piece of her. Into this crisis comes the weary Theo (Clive Owen), who is asked by an old girlfriend (Julianne Moore) to guide the expectant mother to freedom through a landscape of tribulation and trial. Cuarón gives us no time to ruminate on the credibility of his setup, quickening the pace until we are caught in a breathless running battle between dissenters and government troops. The film, based on a novel by P. D. James, is neither likable nor heartening; nor, despite the rapture of the child's birth, does it feel like the bringer of good news. Yet the fierceness of the storytelling exerts an unbroken grip, and there is leavening, of a sort, from Michael Caine, who plays a joint-puffing hippie in the woods—the last happy man in the world.—*Anthony Lane* (1/8/07) (In wide release.)

THE COMEDY OF POWER

The exuberant cynicism of Claude Chabrol's ironic drama, about a crusading prosecutor's campaign against corporate and political corruption, yields to his deeper doubts about the nature of justice. The straight-arrow official, Jeanne Charmant-Killman—whom Isabelle Huppert invests with her unique blend of calm assurance and taut control—first targets Michel Humeau (François Berléand), a graying C.E.O. with a messy love life whose paper trail leads to friends in high places. But, as the investigation closes in on the real powers behind the far-reaching scheme, these big-time operators—all men, all smooth middle-aged bons vivants—turn the tables on the inquisitor. Drawing on the real-life prosecution of a recent scandal, Chabrol, a former law student, seems to be having more fun with a film than he's had in years, and it's contagious. His suavely professional filmmaking builds to delicate piercing strokes at the big moments, and poses his bigger question: if injustice gives such pleasure, how can the French resist? In French.—*R.B.* (IFC Center.)

THE DEAD GIRL

Karen Moncrieff's harsh yet tender post-feminist drama, set in a desolate West of small houses and cheap motels, resembles a short, sharp novel about wrecked lives and belated redemption. Its five chapters concerning five women—the titular victim and four others affected by her death—are energized by the intensely focussed, lived-in performances Moncrieff gets from Toni Collette, as the stranger who finds the body, Mary Beth Hurt, as the killer's wife, Marcia Gay Harden, as the girl's mother, and especially Rose Byrne, who is quietly luminous as a pathologist who studies the corpse. In a final flashback that brings the story full circle, Brittany Murphy is the girl herself, a young prostitute with a touching, plausible dilemma. The finely observed scenes are built from moments of realistic pain that deftly evoke lifetimes of bad memories, but Moncrieff's quasi-literary achievement has a price: the film is nothing to look at, awkward shots strive vainly toward style, and the music is ridiculously portentous. But the many lapses in directorial taste and judgment don't break the spell of honest feeling or blur the hard-won wisdom that emerges from the experience.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

DREAMGIRLS

Bill Condon's adaptation of the 1981 Broadway musical, the barely disguised tale of Berry Gordy and the rise of the Supremes in the sixties, has an irresistible momentum. There are written expository passages and photomontages chronicling the events of the period, but just about everything else is sung; the songs aren't commentary on the drama, they are the drama. The three women in the original group are played by Anika Noni Rose, Beyoncé Knowles, and Jennifer Hudson, who, as the oversized Effie, doesn't fit—she has a big, soulful voice and an even bigger mouth. She's thrown out but not forgotten, and Beyoncé, whom we had barely noticed at first, moves into the center of the movie. Based on that glamorous imp Diana Ross, she allows the Berry Gordy figure (Jamie Foxx) to dress her up as a swank mannequin but finally breaks free. In its way, the picture is a serious study of the issue of commercial packaging versus art.—*D.D.* (12/25/06 & 1/1/07) (In wide release.)

THE GOOD GERMAN

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, a reporter named Jake Geismer (George Clooney) returns to Berlin, where he meets an old flame named Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett). By coincidence, she is now the girlfriend of Geismer's young and unsavory driver (Tobey Maguire); her husband, presumed dead, used to work for the German V-2 program, which means that various interested parties would like to find her. Such is the tangled setup of Steven Soderbergh's new movie, which not only pays homage to the films of the period but makes a concerted effort to resemble them, from the glow of the monochrome images down to the shaky plainness of the credits. This is smart and endearing for a while, but you soon want to ask: why bother? Why seek to replicate back-projection, for instance, when those compelled to use it at the time would have been thrilled to find something more realistic? And, above all, is the Berlin of 1945, with its dense political divisions and its barely shifted burden of immense suffering, the right place in which to practice an artistic game? As if destabilized by these uncertainties, the main players lack definition; it is left to the supporting actors—notably Leland Orser, as an American war-crimes investigator—to summon the air of troubled inquiry that the story needs.—*A.L.* (12/18/06) (In wide release.)

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Robert De Niro's film about the rise of the C.I.A., from a brilliantly constructed screenplay by Eric Roth, is a sombre but fascinating social history of the agency and a meditation on the themes of trust and betrayal. Matt Damon, giving a recessive performance in the manner of Al Pacino's work in "Godfather II," is Edward Wilson, a Yale Skull and Bones member who gets inducted into the O.S.S. in 1939; he then spends the war in London working with a charming but treacherous Kim Philby-type British agent (Billy Crudup) and winds up in Washington as the agency's head of counterintelligence during the early Cold War period. A precise, selfless, and stolid man who operates, for all his shrewdness, in a fog of suspicion, he can't—or won't—protect those closest to him. The movie, whose wide-spanning plot (covering twenty-two years) is the working embodiment of paranoia, turns into Wilson's tragedy.—*D.D.* (12/25/06 & 1/1/07) (In wide release.)

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

NOTES ON A SCANDAL

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

THE PAINTED VEIL

Marriage on the rocks, W. Somerset Maugham style. Set in nineteen-twenties China, the story concerns a stuffy bacteriologist (Edward Norton) who, after discovering that his flirty wife (Naomi Watts) is having an affair, signs them up to work in a Chinese province that is suffering from a cholera epidemic. The seeming joint-suicide pact of the characters is played out in hushed, uncommunicative scenes that have the power of penance, and Norton's and Watts's performances are mutely intelligent. But when the film works in the political uprisings of the time and the redemptive power of their volunteer work (he finds the source of the disease, she takes care of orphaned children), it never heats up, and becomes gently lulling instead. The director, John Curran, and the screenwriter, Ron Nyswaner, have varnished away any trace of a rough edge.—*Bruce Diones* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

PAN'S LABYRINTH

The Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, who made "The Devil's Backbone," digs deeper still into his chosen field of the political horror story. The new movie is set in 1944 in a rural Spanish backwater, where Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), a young girl of unnerving poise, travels to meet her new stepfather (Sergi López), who commands a military outpost. One question posed by the film is, Who is the monster here? Is it the stepfather, with his creaking gloves and his savage treatment of local republican troublemakers? Could it be Franco, who has brought the country to this pass? Or is it the creatures—a mixture of animal, vegetable, and alien—that Ofelia meets in a stone labyrinth, and under whose eyes she endures a series of harsh, not to say sadistic, challenges? At times, her adventures are hard to watch, and the whole film works at a pitch of violence that will shock admirers of more placid fantasy. The result is provoking, inventive, and clever to a fault; everything has been planned and thought through with such care that some of the spontaneity has been squeezed from the proceedings. If it lives and breathes, it is largely due to Lopez and to Álex Angulo, who is wonderful in the Chekhovian role of a good doctor. In Spanish.—*A.L.* (1/8/07) (In wide release.)

PERFUME: THE STORY OF A MURDERER

Patrick Süskind's best-smelling novel is finally brought to the screen, at inordinate length. Ben Whishaw plays the glowering Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, born among the fish stalls of eighteenth-century Paris, who follows his nose and becomes the assistant to a noted Italian perfumer (Dustin Hoffman). From here, our hero treks to the South of France, and, in a bid to create the perfect scent, kills a selection of young women, distilling the aroma of each. That in itself engenders a problem for the director, Tom Tykwer, who has to drag us through a roster of deaths, barely pausing to introduce the victims. The one exception is Laura (Rachel Hurd-Wood), whose father (Alan Rickman) does everything to protect her from the killer. Rickman and Hoffman recognize the tale for the rich, exotic nonsense that it is and offer ripe performances to match—unlike Whishaw, whose sniffing intensity turns the young devil into something of a humorless bore. Only toward the end does the absurdity bear fruit, as an entire French town succumbs to a mass orgy, laid bare by a whiff of the divine.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

THE PLAYER

Robert Altman's inside-Hollywood comedy derides the decision-making system that turns most American movies into fun-house attractions; in effect, this is Altman's lightly satirical version of a studio tour. It kicks off with a virtuoso nine-minute moving-camera shot that introduces the bustle of big-studio pitching. It keeps rolling as the antihero, studio production chief Griffin Mill (Tim Robbins), murders a screenwriter he thinks is threatening him, endures a police investigation, defends his corporate turf, and takes us through the process that can transform even a tough-minded flop into a potential smash hit. The screenwriter, Michael Tolkin, who adapted his own dark 1988 novel, puts a morally tainted and psychologically vulnerable antihero in the middle of Hollywood, and it works. Mill is being squeezed from the top and bottom, and the lanky Robbins is perfect for the part: watching him under stress is like seeing a tube of toothpaste bunch up in the middle. And everything to do with a message movie within the movie, called "Habeas Corpus," is uproarious. But this time out, Altman, the master at putting felt life onscreen, fills a movie with fake life:

everything is designed to make us feel that it's only a movie. Released in 1992.—*Michael Sragow* (IFC Center; Jan. 13.)

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS
Will Smith gives an impressively grownup performance in this movie, based on the real-life experience of the African-American businessman Chris Gardner. Failing as a San Francisco medical-supply salesman in the Reagan eighties, Gardner risks all to enter a non-paying training program at Dean Witter Reynolds, where only one of the twenty interns will be offered a position. His wife, fiercely played by Thandie Newton, leaves him and Chris, Jr. (nine-year-old Jaden Smith, Will's son). Father and son's living conditions descend steadily from apartment to motel to shelters to the streets. For a feel-good movie, it's pretty grim for much of the way, but the elder Smith's trademark flashes of humor and the soundtrack's classic Stevie Wonder songs leave little doubt that the resolution will be uplifting. Directed by Gabriele Muccino.—*Ken Marks* (In wide release.)

THE SILENCE
This 1963 drama by Ingmar Bergman begins with one of the director's signature sequences: a boy (Jörgen Lindström) riding with two women in a compartment of a train breaks free and beholds, with frozen wonder, an ominous transport of tanks on the opposite track. One of the women, Anna (Gunnel Lindblom), is his mother; the other, Ester (Ingrid Thulin), is her sister, whose coughing jags cause the group to leave the train in a strange city and put up in a desolate, palatial hotel while she tries to recuperate. In a country where none of them speak the language (invented by Bergman), the women endure the monotony and isolation by contriving hothouse passions, playing erotic games, and unleashing pent-up resentments, all of which take place in the presence of the blankly bewildered boy. If the drama unfolds the grand themes of childhood and its mute sensibility, adulthood and its tearing at lifelong emotional scars, the film's enduring greatness lies elsewhere: in Bergman's highly inflected images, which have an anguished intensity and a philosophical power unseen since the age of silent films. In Swedish.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Jan. 12 and Jan. 14.)

TEARS OF THE BLACK TIGER
In this exuberantly stylized romantic Western from Thailand, the director Wisit Sasanatieng's joyful, knowing channelling of classic-era popcorn-movie conventions brings its cardboard characters and Grand Guignol drama to life. Rumpoey (Stella Malucchi), a young beauty dolled up like an Asian Liz Taylor, awaits her lover at a lonely riverside gazebo in a misty rainstorm, but he does not show: Dum, the Black Tiger (Chartchai Ngamsan), the unbeatable gunslinger in a band of outlaws, is busy mowing down a house of enemies—including one with a multiple-ricochet shot so absurdly amazing that a title card announces a slow-motion replay for viewers who missed it. The whole film unspools with similarly naïve gimmicks that lend the dime-store romance an air of light-headed wonder—wistful flashbacks, whiz-bang coincidences, ludicrous spurts of stage blood, swooping crane shots, a sharply graphic and imaginative choice of comic-book-like angles, and, to top it off, an elaborate digital reprocessing to hype up the dazzlingly confectionery color scheme. This hybrid of family saga, crime thriller, soap opera, and Western adventure is a cinematic sugar rush. In Thai.—*R.B.* (Film Forum.)

"Tears of the Black Tiger" opens Jan. 12 at Film Forum.

ZOHAR LAZAR

Also Playing

CODE NAME: THE CLEANER: In wide release. **ERAGON:** In wide release. **FREEDOM WRITERS:** In wide release. **HAPPILY N'EVER AFTER:** In wide release. **NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM:** In wide release. **ROCKY BALBOA:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"NewFilmmakers Salutes Radical Identity Adjustment." Jan. 10: Film program and panel discussion (see below in Readings and Talks). ♦ "Artists Space Presents." Jan. 15 at 7:30: "Notes for an African Orestes" (1968-69, Pier Paolo Pasolini; in Italian), "Outer and Inner Space" (1965, Andy Warhol), and "Television (An Address)" (2005, François Bucher).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Feb. 27: The films of Jean-Pierre Léaud. Jan. 16 at 12:30, 4, and 7: "Paris Awakens" (1991, Olivier Assayas; in French).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—The films of Woody Allen. Jan. 10 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10: "Zelig" (1983). ♦ Jan. 10 at 2:40, 6:15, and 9:50: "The Front" (1976, Martin Ritt). ♦ Jan. 11 at 1:15, 5:15, and 9:15: "Deconstructing Harry" (1997). ♦ Jan. 11 at 3:10 and 7:10: "Crimes and Misdemeanors" (1989). ♦ In revival. Jan. 10-11 at 1, 3:45, 6:45, and 9:30: "Army of Shadows" (1969, Jean-Pierre Melville; in French). ♦ Jan. 12-18 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, 7:30, and 9:40: "Ace in the Hole" (1951, Billy Wilder).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—Through Jan. 23: The films of Robert Altman. Jan. 10 at 12:20, 5:15, and 10:10: "California Split" (1974). ♦ Jan. 10 at 2:40 and 7:35: "Vincent & Theo" (1990). ♦ Jan. 11 at 12:45, 3, 5:15, 7:30, and 9:45: "A Prairie Home Companion" (2006). ♦ Jan. 12 at 11:30 A.M., 4:50, and 8:10: "That Cold Day in the Park" (1969). ♦ Jan. 12 at 1:40, 6, and 10:20: "Images" (1972). ♦ Jan. 13 at 11:15 A.M., 4:25, and 9:35: "The Player" (†). ♦ Jan. 13 at 1:50 and 7: "Gosford Park" (2001). ♦ Jan. 14-15 at 11:30 A.M., 2:45, 6, and 9:15: "Nashville" (1975). ♦ Jan. 16 at 12:15, 5:10, and 10:05: "Prêt-à-Porter" (1994). ♦ Jan. 16 at 2:45 and 7:40: "Cookie's Fortune" (1999). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Jan. 12-13: "Shortbus" (2006, John Cameron Mitchell).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Recent Acquisitions: Universal Pictures." Jan. 11 at 6: "Erin Brockovich" (2000, Steven Soderbergh). ♦ Jan. 11 at 8:30: "Out of Sight" (1998, Soderbergh). ♦ Films scored by Franz Waxman. Jan. 10 at 6: "The Furies" (1950, Anthony Mann). ♦ Jan. 11 at 6:30: "The Two Mrs. Carrolls" (1947, Peter Godfrey). ♦ Jan. 11 at 8:30: "Peyton Place" (1957, Mark Robson). ♦ Jan. 12 at 6:30: "Mauvaise Graine" (1934, Billy Wilder and Alexander Esway). ♦ Jan. 13 at 6:30: "Sayonara" (1957, Joshua Logan). ♦ Jan. 14 at 2:30: "Edge of Darkness" (1943, Lewis Milestone). ♦ Jan. 14 at 5: "Taras Bulba" (1962, J. Lee Thompson). ♦ Jan. 15 at 8: "Old Acquaintance" (1943, Vincent Sherman). ♦ "Still Moving," films from the museum's collections. Jan. 11-12 at 4:30: "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" (1972, Luis Buñuel; in French). ♦ "Sven Nykvist Remembered." Jan. 12 at 6 and Jan. 14 at 4: "The Silence" (†). ♦ Jan. 12 at 8 and Jan. 14 at 2: "An-Magritt" (1969, Arne Skouen; in Norwegian and Swedish). ♦ Jan. 13 at 2 and Jan. 14 at 6: "Crimes and Misdemeanors" (1989, Woody Allen). ♦ "Asian Cinevisions." Jan. 12 at 8:15 and Jan. 13 at 4: "Rigodon" (2005, Sari Lluch Dalena and Keith Sicat; in Tagalog and English). The Jan. 12 screening will be introduced by the directors. ♦ "Gaumont Presents." Jan. 15 at 7: "Don Giovanni" (1979, Joseph Losey; sung in Italian), introduced by the chairman of Gaumont, Nicolas Seydoux.

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Critics Choice: Great Documentaries." Jan. 13 at 2: "The Thin Blue Line" (1988, Errol Morris), introduced by Mike D'Angelo. ♦ Jan. 13 at 4:30: "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" (1996, Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky), introduced by Stephen Whitty and followed by a discussion with the directors. ♦ Jan. 14 at 5: "The Man with a Movie Camera" (1929, Dziga Vertov; silent), introduced by J. Hoberman.

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—In revival. Jan. 10 at 6:50: "Jules and Jim" (1961, François Truffaut; in French). ♦ In première. Jan. 10-14 and Jan. 16 at 9: "Ever Since the World Ended" (2001, Calum Grant and Joshua Atesh Litle).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." Jan. 12 at 9:30: "Fahrenheit 451" (1966, François Truffaut), introduced by DJ Spooky.

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Jan. 12-14: "The Princess Bride" (1987, Rob Reiner).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—In revival. Jan. 14 at 1 and 5:30: "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" (1972, Werner Herzog; in German).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Dance on Camera Festival. Jan. 12 at 6:15: Program 12, including "Georgians in the Mariinsky" (2003, Zurab Inashvili). ♦ Jan. 12 at 8:30: Program 3, including "Biped" (2006, Charles Atlas). ♦ Jan. 13 at 2: Program 14, "Dido and Aeneas, a Danced Opera" (1995, Barbara Willis Sweete). ♦ Jan. 13 at 4: Program 15, "Invitation to the Dance" (1956, Gene Kelly). ♦ Through Jan. 25: New York Jewish Film Festival. Jan. 10 at 1 and Jan. 11 at 1 and 6:15: "Nuremberg: The Nazis Facing Their Crimes" (2005, Christian Delage; in English, French, German, and Russian). ♦ Jan. 10 at 3:30 and 8:30 and Jan. 11 at 3:30: "My Mexican Shivah" (2006, Alejandro Springali; in Spanish, Hebrew, and Yiddish). ♦ Jan. 13 at 9 and Jan. 14 at 3:45: "Sonia" (2006, Lucy Kostelanetz). ♦ Jan. 14 at 1:30: "Love and Sacrifice" (1936, George Roland; in Yiddish), introduced by the film's star, Esta Salzman. ♦ Jan. 15 at 5:30 and Jan. 16 at 3:30: "Our Children" (1948, Natan Gross and Shaul Goskind; in Yiddish). ♦ Jan. 15 at 8: "White Terror" (2005, Daniel Schweizer; in French, English, German, and Russian).

READINGS AND TALKS

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
Anthology is screening three recent documentaries about radical sexual practices and body-image concerns from the margins of society, followed by a panel discussion with academics who will help make sense of it all. The first film is "The Gift," from 2003, which is about gay men who deliberately try to get infected with H.I.V. The second is "American Eunuchs: Designed Identities," from 2004, which is about the underworld of men who voluntarily choose castration. The final film, "Whole," from 2004, documents individuals with a psychological need to amputate a limb. The panel discussion features Herbert Krauss, a professor of psychology at Pace University; Sandra Cohen, a psychoanalyst with Cornell University Medical School; and Victoria Pitts, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York. (32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. 212-505-5181. Jan. 10, starting at 5:30.)

"LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION!"
The New Museum's "Hot Button" discussion series continues with Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic for the *Times*; Roger Buergel, artistic director of Documenta 12; Saskia Bos, dean of the school of art at Cooper Union; Teddy Cruz, a prize-winning architect; and Julie Mehretu, an artist and MacArthur fellow, considering the role of local cultures in an age of globalism. Richard Flood, the chief curator at the New Museum, is the moderator. (Great Hall, Cooper Union, 7 E. 7th St. Tickets at the door. Jan. 10 at 6:30.)

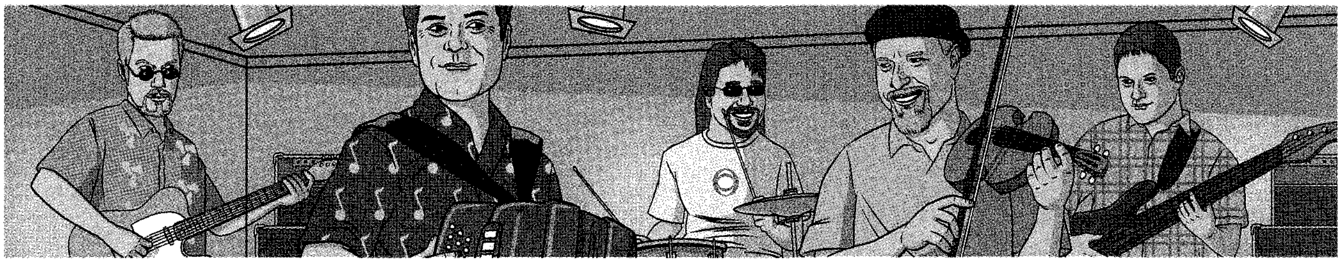
RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
The novelist Amitav Ghosh talks with Thant Myint-U, the grandson of U-Thant, the second Secretary General of the United Nations, and the author of the new book "The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma." (150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5000, ext. 344. Jan. 14 at 2.)

"MR. BELLER'S NEIGHBORHOOD"
Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, Abigail Frankfurt, Kate Hall, and Patrick J. Sauer, all of whom are contributors to the New York-centric Web site mrbellersneighborhood.com, read from their work. (Mo Pitkin's House of Satisfaction, 43 Avenue A, between 2nd and 3rd Sts. No tickets necessary. Jan. 14 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"WHITNEY LIVE"
The band Text of Light, which takes its name from a Stan Brakhage film, is led by Lee Ranaldo, of Sonic Youth, and the composer and guitarist Alan Licht. On Jan. 12 at 7:30, the group visits the Whitney to perform improvisatory music to projected work by László Moholy-Nagy, including his abstract film "Light Play: Black-White-Gray," from 1930. (Madison Ave. at 75th St. 800-944-8639.)

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., DAY
The Brooklyn Academy of Music celebrates the late civil-rights leader with a free day of music, film, and speeches. Rutha Harris, one of the founding members of the group the Freedom Singers (who, in addition to playing countless demonstrations in the sixties, also warmed up the crowd in Washington before King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech), will be joined by Will Power, a hip-hop theatre innovator, the Black Rock Coalition Orchestra, and the Full Effect Gospel Ministries Mass Choir, from East Flatbush and East New York, Brooklyn. "American Blackout," a documentary about voting irregularities in the 2000 and 2004 elections, will be screened, and Christine C. Quinn (the New York City Council Speaker), William C. Thompson, Jr. (the city comptroller), and other local politicians will be on hand. (30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Jan. 15, starting at 10:30 A.M.)



ON THE HORIZON

CLASSICAL MUSIC
FELLINI'S GOTHAM
Jan. 25

Rossini's one-act comedy "Il Signor Bruschino" hasn't been seen in New York since 1932. It's perfect fare for the Gotham Chamber Opera, which will stage the piece in the nineteen-sixties Rome evoked by such films as "La Dolce Vita." (212-279-4200.)

MOVIES
IRAN AND ON
Jan. 26-31

Bahman Farmanara's "Prince Ehtejab," about a dying monarch, is considered the most important Iranian film of the seventies. His 1979 film, "Tall Shadows of the Wind," was banned both by the Shah and the Islamic regime. He emigrated and later returned to Iran; he did not make his next film until 2000. Walter Reade Theatre will show five of Farmanara's films, along with a documentary from 2006 about the Iranian New Wave. (212-875-5600.)

ART
MATERIAL WITNESS
Feb. 11-May 7

The Brazilian-born artist Vik Muniz has arranged paper-punch dots, trash, chocolate, diamonds, dirt, and other materials for photographs that re-create images from art history and pop culture. P.S. 1's "Reflex" will present work from throughout Muniz's career. (718-784-2084.)

NIGHT LIFE
CUTTING A RUG
Feb. 11

The concert series "Let's Zydeco" gives New Yorkers an early jump on Mardi Gras by bringing Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys, a gang of top-shelf musicians from rural Louisiana with deep Cajun roots, to Connolly's, a pub on West Forty-fifth Street. (www.letszydeco.com.)

DANCE
FLAMENCO FEAST
Feb. 15-24

Once a year, the Spaniards come to town with their *mantones* and nail-studded shoes to show off at the Flamenco Festival. This time around, the festival will feature the rigorous artistry of dancers like Carmen Cortés and Isabel Bayón, as well as the more modern choreographies of Rafaela Carrasco and Sara Baras. (212-545-7536.)

Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys, at Connolly's.

MICHAEL WELDON

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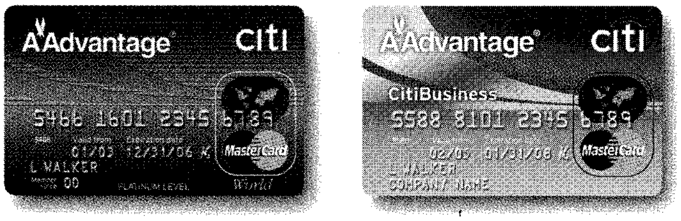

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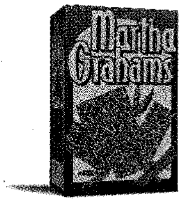
THERE'S NOT ENOUGH ART IN OUR SCHOOLS.

NO WONDER PEOPLE THINK

MARTHA GRAHAM

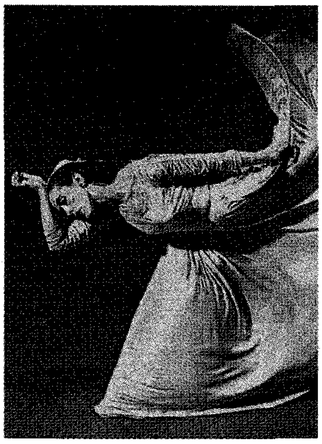
IS A SNACK CRACKER.

Hardly a fitting legacy for the woman who, despite getting a late start at the positively elderly age of 17, became the mother of American interpretive dance.



A misconception. Not to mention an overlooked marketing opportunity.

With verve and nearly single-handedly, Martha Graham brought her dance style into the 20th century. She did nothing less than create an entirely new genre of dance, while shattering the expectations of audiences and critics alike with her percussive, angular movement style. She was one of the first dancers to collaborate with contemporary composers instead of using the 18th- and 19th-century compositions her predecessors favored. Her dances have been called "motion pictures for the sophisticated"; her theories on movement and kinesthetics are still vital today; and there is scarcely a dancer alive who doesn't owe a huge debt to her sharp creative mind and fierce perfectionism.



Ms. Graham told stories using movement. Here, she tells us how sad it is that kids aren't getting enough art.

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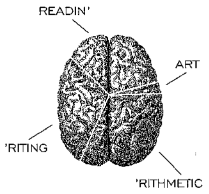

Let art borrow some brain. It'll return it in better condition.

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AMERICANS for the ARTS

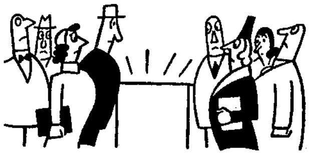
©Barbara Morgan, from "Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs" by Barbara Morgan.

DORIS DUKE
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
DESOLATION ROWS



The hanging of Saddam Hussein was meant to be, by the depraved standards of the Iraq war, something of a feel-good moment. President Bush saw it that way, or claimed to. A statement issued in his name stressed that Saddam's execution had been made possible by "the Iraqi people's determination to create a society governed by the rule of law." The deposed dictator's dangling, the President said, "is an important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy. . . . We are reminded today of how far the Iraqi people have come since the end of Saddam Hussein's rule."

Compared to many of the other horrors that have served as milestones along the four-year journey from shock and awe through stay the course to surge and pray, what happened at 6:10 A.M. on December 30th in that dank, foul-smelling execution chamber was relatively free of bloodshed. Only one person was killed, and he was anything but an innocent civilian. Yet in many quarters—here, in Iraq, and around the world—there has been a conspicuous failure to feel good.

It did not take long for the hanging to become a metaphor for the over-all disaster of which it is part. Although the deed was done in a rush, under conditions of dubious legality, and with little regard for its aftermath, initial reports suggested that it had at least been done with appropriate solemnity, and that the condemned man had gone to his death meekly, as if acknowledging, even repenting, his crimes. According to the first dispatch posted online by the *Times*, "Those in the room said that Mr. Hussein was dressed entirely in black and carrying a Koran and that he was compliant as the noose was draped around his neck." One witness was quoted as saying, "He just gave up. We were astonished. It was strange. He just gave up."

Mission accomplished, you might say. But as the details trickled out—first via officially provided videotape, silent and redacted; then via cell-phone-camera samizdat, jerky and noisy; finally via fuller eyewitness accounts—a truer picture emerged. The hangmen's black ski masks, the jeers, the jostling in the dark, the shouts of "God damn you," the chanted prayer cut short by the sudden *chunk-chunk* of the trapdoor and the violent interruption of the prisoner's free fall, the display of the glassy-eyed corpse—the brutal spectacle bore an irresistible resemblance to a video from some terrorist Web site. The sectarian subtext compounded the catastrophe. "Moktada! Moktada! Moktada!" guards chanted—Moktada being Moktada al-Sadr, the militant cleric whose Shiite militia is responsible for the wholesale murder and torture of Sunnis and whose support is vital to the political survival of Iraq's nominal government. Saddam's tormentors gave him an unexpected, undeserved gift. Their taunts chased away his fear and awakened his contempt. "Moktada?" he shot back. "Is this how real men behave?" A few seconds later, the trap sprang. The ex-tyrant died with a curse on his lips and a sneer on his face, a plausible candidate for warrior-martyr mythmaking.

CLEA ERS
ALTERA ONS
MAGAZINES · CANDY · GREETING CARDS...
CLEANERS
Alterations

LAURENT CILLUFFO

Within the limits of its reach, Saddam's regime was as murderous and fearsome as all but a handful of the modern era's many dictatorships: not quite on the level of Hitler's or Stalin's, but far, far worse than the likes of Pinochet's or Ceauşescu's. No trial was required to prove Saddam's guilt; no punishment could be commensurate to his offenses. The aims of any proceedings against him were not forensic or punitive but educational and, in the highest sense, political. The best venue would have been an international court, like the one that prosecuted Slobodan Milosevic; but the Bush Administration's disdain for such institutions was nearly a match for Saddam's own. A trial or trials under Iraqi auspices had, or should have had, several purposes: to bolster the legitimacy of the fledgling government; to demonstrate the impartiality of its justice system; to promote national reconciliation; to act as an inquest into the full scope and range of the dictatorship's crimes, and to draw a line under its methods; to deny impunity to the dictator himself. Only the last of these purposes was served. The others have actually been damaged, especially reconciliation. Saddam, a Sunni, had been convicted only of the deaths of a hundred and forty-eight Shiite men and boys. His trial in the genocidal killings of a hundred thousand Kurds was still in progress. His execution—which snuffed out any light he might, over time, have cast on the dark history of his rule—was timed, as if in deliberate insult, for the first day of the Sunni celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha; the Shiites' Eid al-Adha began a day later. And the severity and the ugliness of that execution, as well as its tincture of sectarian hatred, betrayed a sad continuity with the ways of the regime whose leader went to the gallows.

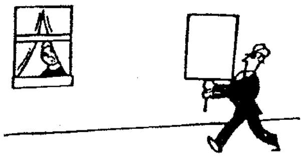
The hanging raises the same question as the war: was the problem the thing itself, or merely that the thing was botched? By Thursday, even Bush was showing signs of recognition that Saddam's execution had not been a wholly positive development. "I wish, obviously, that the proceedings had been done in a more dignified way," he told reporters. But it is legitimate to doubt—in fact, it is grotesque to suggest—that hanging (or beheading, stoning, shooting, electrocution, or lethal injection, the other methods currently in use in the countries, most of them unfree, that still practice capital punishment) can possibly be done in a "dignified way." On page 1 of last Wednesday's *Times*, the lead story, in the right-hand column, concerned the Iraqi government's ordering an investigation into "the abusive behavior at the execution of Saddam Hussein." Across the page, the second lead was headlined PANEL SEEKS END TO DEATH PENALTY FOR NEW JERSEY. It reported a legislative commission's findings that there is no good evidence that capital punishment serves any legitimate purpose and much evidence that it "is inconsistent with evolving standards of decency."

The death penalty remains lawful in thirty-eight states. Though its application has been suspended in ten of them, including, last month, Florida and California, none have abolished it in the thirty years since the Supreme Court reinstated it. Slightly more than three thousand people are locked in the death rows of the United States—a pungent number, given the tolls of 9/11 and of American forces in Iraq. And the fate of those who die strapped to our gurneys and electric chairs is crueller than Saddam Hussein's. He was hanged fifty-five days after he was sentenced, and the elapsed time between his transfer to Iraqi custody and his execution was forty minutes. In our country, the pattern is to be condemned in youth and executed in middle age. A person is sentenced, in effect, to an indefinite period of imprisonment—an average of between ten and twelve years, but often much longer—in conditions of constant anxiety and isolation, after which, at a year and date and time unknown, he is taken from his cell and burned or poisoned to death. California's first judicial killing of 2006 disposed of a man who had been on death row for twenty-three years. Seventy-six years old, legally blind from diabetes, suffering from heart disease, he made the journey to the death chamber in a wheelchair. It is an irony, and not a nice one, that this uniquely American brand of sadism is a result of the obstacles that our justice system rightly demands be overcome before an execution can take place.

Some have charged that those who objected to Saddam's hanging thereby minimized his crimes. But if Saddam's guilt were to be the measure of his punishment he would have to have been tortured to death—and even then the retribution would have been inadequate. Capital punishment's worst affront is not to the dignity and humanity of the condemned. It is to the dignity and humanity of the polity that decrees it.

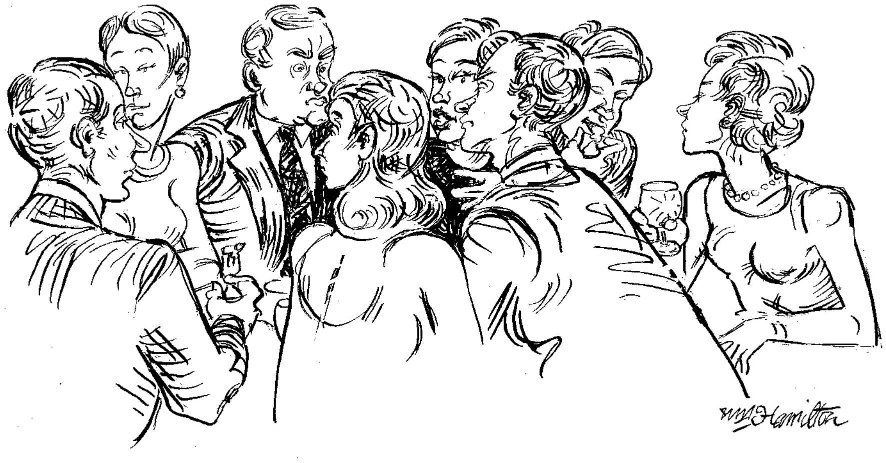
—Hendrik Hertzberg

PEST DEPT.
ROACH!



It is a common misunderstanding, propagated by the movies, that a grizzly bear, when it stands on its hind legs, is preparing to attack. In fact, it is just rising up for a better look. So remain calm. Don't run, shoot, climb a tree, or curl into a ball.

A giant standing cockroach, on the other hand: this can be serious. You're on your own here. Let's just say you want to get clear of it, quickly. Cockroaches do bite, and they can live for a month or so without their heads, and if wounded they heal fast. According to Joseph Kunkel, a biology professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who wrote his dissertation on cockroach-limb regeneration, a roach will delay a molting cycle in order to grow back a lost leg, because its swift movements depend on having three feet on the ground, or the linoleum, at all



"Oh dear—am I hearing the clash of antlers?"

times. (These are some of the things you learn when, having fled a giant standing cockroach, you return safely to an office with Web-search capabilities and happen upon the apparently limitless roach wisdom of Dr. Kunkel.)

The giant standing cockroach in question was spotted last week in front of an apartment building on Eighty-third Street, just east of Madison Avenue. It was twelve feet tall and hideous, its tentacles waving in the breeze. It was also—on closer, but not too close, inspection—fake. It was an inflatable cockroach.

No doubt, you've seen those giant inflatable rats around town, which union representatives sometimes station in front of work sites to protest the hiring of non-union labor. Perhaps you've stopped even noticing them. Their bared fangs and claws and red eyes no longer startle, as they did when they began turning up, fifteen or so years ago. They have become as unremarkable as sneakers hanging from street lamps.

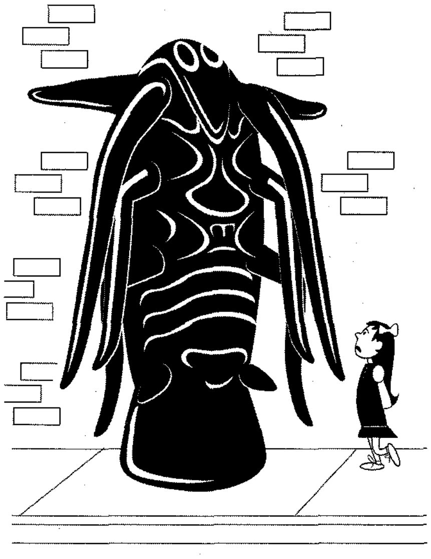
And so the cockroach cometh. The cycle of indifference requires intermittent escalation, ever more lurid sequels. Roaches may be preferable to rats, if you're talking apartment infestation, but, when it comes to street-corner-protest infestation, they may be worse. Perhaps this has something to do with relative magnitude of enlargement or with the inflatable roach's authentic mahogany sheen or the creepy wagging tumescence of its legs—not the kind of thing you'd want to see silhouetted on the shower curtain. The rats, on the other hand, make you think of "The Nutcracker" or "Charlotte's Web."

This Upper East Side specimen, worn and dusty, was the property, for the moment, of a small cadre of organizers from Local 78, a hazardous-materials removers' union. "This is not our cockroach, to be honest," Eli Kent, one of the organizers, said last week. Local 78 had borrowed it from Local 12A, which had purchased two of them from Big Sky Balloons, an Illinois outfit that makes the rats, along with assorted other rabble-rousing inflatables, such as skunks, fat cats, and greedy pigs. Since December 14th, Local 78's organizers had been setting it up on weekday mornings outside the apartment building (some days they brought a rat or a gorilla instead) to call attention to a tenant there who had apparently hired non-union workers on an asbestos-removal job at a building downtown. They handed out flyers ("Shame!") with the tenant's name, photograph, and home-phone number, and with a photograph of a young woman who died of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. The neighbors seemed to be siding with the tenant. (According to a doorman, an elderly man in the building had found the cockroach so repellent that he tried, without success, to wrestle it to the sidewalk.) And it was scaring some of the kids. Still, the roach has its admirers. One organizer said that workingmen had been coming down from the Bronx to get a look at it.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT RISKO

"Unions are diversifying," Kent said. "It's not your grampa's union. People are too used to the rat. It's just like clichés, right? An analogy can be good, but, once people use it all the time, it ceases to have any meaning." Kent also pointed out that lawyers at the National Labor Relations Board had recently made the argument that erecting an inflatable rat was an unlawful picketing act. This designation does not affect inflatable skunks or cockroaches.

Paco Vega, the business manager and secretary-treasurer of Local 12A, and the purchaser of the balloons, said last week, "Some people hate rats, some people hate cockroaches. I hate cockroaches. I see one, I go running." He especially appreciates, for symbolic purposes, the cockroach's purported ability to survive a nuclear war. Kunkel, the roach professor, isn't sure that this is true.



Union cockroach

—*Nick Paumgarten*

HELL NO DEPT.
THE CHAPPAQUA THREE

The adult American suburban male, Northeastern division, marks the onset of maturity with the display of certain physical attributes (bathrobe, hard shoes, London Fog outerwear) and behaviors (mowing grass, drinking on commuter trains). This last rite has been immortalized by everyone from the Web site Barcar.com to Robert Penn Warren, who wrote, "Caleb Winthrop, Harvard '53, crew, Porcellian/Sits in the bar car of the 5:02, Grand Central, and/Shuts his eyes, and/Shudders." It came under threat last month when Mitchell Pally, a board member of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, proposed a measure to ban the purchase and consumption of alcohol on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North. The M.T.A. has convened a task force to study the issue. A band of passengers has convened Commuters Allied for Responsible Enjoyment, or CARE, which will oppose the measure with "acts of peaceful remonstrance mostly." As one of its founders, Richard Shea, wrote on the group's Web site, which will launch this week:

> A glass of beer or wine at day's end is one of the small comforts that make a big difference in daily life. . . . If we allow our freedoms to be arbitrarily stripped away we will soon become participants in a nightmare of modern urban existence: hollow-eyed robots, herded like cattle into overcrowded, underventilated trains for a joyless trip home.

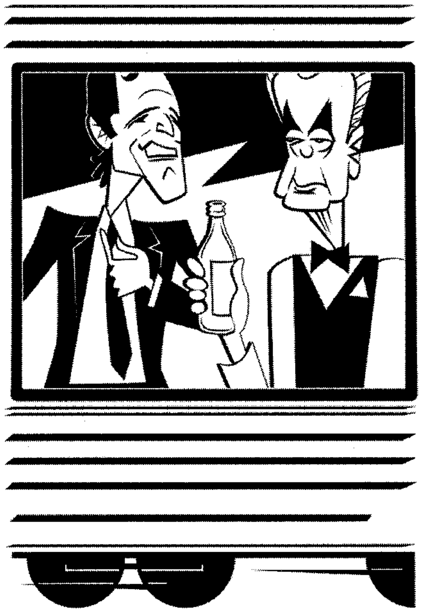
A professional public-relations man, Shea is, by his own admission, an improbable activist. "Normally, I am an opponent and a proponent of nothing," he said last Thursday night, on the 5:46 to Chappaqua. He was joined by David Karat, a sales executive and fellow CARE founder he got to know after their wives and sons became friendly through the local chapter of Mommy and Me. (A third founder, Kevin Pearce, was stuck at a work dinner.) Both men were wearing blue suits, and Shea carried a bouquet of yellow tulips. They located a vacant three-seater, next to the bathroom, squished in, and distributed Amstel Lights and Budweisers, which they had bought on the platform from a uniformed bartender.

"It's the Calvinist schoolmarmish vibe of it all that gets me," Shea began.

Pwssssssssht. He popped the tab on his beer. "When I first moved to New York City, I was broke, and I took the train to go visit someone's dad in Connecticut. There was a guy with a good shirt and a sweater, having a Foster's on his way home. I thought, This isn't bad."

Karat, a native Brit, interjected, "I do think they should ban Foster's, though. It's basically urine."

It was several weeks ago, aboard the 7:08 to Grand Central, that, reading his morning paper, Shea learned about the potential repeal. From his BlackBerry, he e-mailed the article to some friends, including Karat, who mistook it for a bit of *Onion*-esque fake news. "I thought it was dark humor," he said. Since its formation, CARE has received hundreds of e-mails from like-minded riders. "I would be happy to assist to keep our commuters' rights intact instead of commuting like a zombie!" one wrote. Shea said, "We have so many supporters I feel like de Gaulle." He went on, "We got one that said, 'The ability to have a beer with my buddies elevates the stress of my day,' " adding, "William Safire is not currently a member of CARE."



Commuters at cocktail hour

Drinking commuters are not the letter-writing sort. So what is it about train beers that has galvanized an otherwise head-down demographic to, as Craig Ferrero, of South Norwalk, implored, "FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT!!!!"? Reached on the telephone last week, a quorum of commuters explained the sacrosanctity of the ride-home drink.

John Lictro, investment banker, 4:10 to Poughkeepsie, Corona: "I basically kick back and unwind."

Michael Rowe, bond trader, 5:46 to South Norwalk, Bud (though "with the New Year's resolution, I'm going to be hitting the Bud Light a little harder this year"): "It's a good excuse to blow off a little steam."

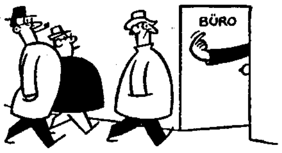
Michael Susi, online media executive, 6:14 to Scarsdale, Sam Adams: "Living in Westchester, there's an air about it. You're not lumped in with everyone who's immature and can't control themselves."

Some echoed, with a surprising poignance, Shea's contention that a homebound nip was, almost in the way of good schools and green lawns, an inalienable part of the suburban ideal, and that its abolition would somehow spoil the sort of manhood to which they had long aspired. Bill Murphy, a bond trader who customarily enlivens the 6:08 to New Canaan with a Coors Light or "light whatever," said, "I grew up in Long Island, where they don't have bar cars. To me, it's one of the best advantages."

Approaching Chappaqua, Shea and Karat agreed. "Pally's Prohibition," Shea said, "will turn the Scarsdale Galahad into the Scarsdale schlemiel." At 6:39, the train pulled into the station. The men gathered their empties, grabbed their coats, and, along with dozens of others, hurried home to put their kids to bed—the wing-tipped migration of an endangered species.

—*Lauren Collins*

SMOKE-FILLED ROOM
WEST SIDE COUP



Hell's Kitchen today bears little resemblance to the world of "West Side Story" and dock wallopers. The old Tenth Avenue saloons frequented by members of the sadistic Westies mob have been replaced by sports bars and brunch spots, and most of the tenement buildings are now called "luxury walkups," as the local power broker Jim McManus likes to say with a bemused rasp. McManus, who is seventy-two, and a lifelong bachelor, has overseen the neighborhood's Tammany Hall-style political club, the McManus Midtown Democratic Association, since 1963, brokering deals and doling out favors to his constituents in the old patronage manner of Carmine DeSapio and Boss Tweed. When the comedian Colin Quinn's aunt, Maureen, is having trouble renewing her lease on West Forty-ninth Street, it is McManus she calls upon for help.

McManus no longer delivers votes in meaningful numbers—his candidate for Manhattan borough president in 2005, Carlos Manzano, placed ninth in a field of nine—but a guest at the club's holiday party, last month, could have been forgiven for thinking he'd stepped into a time warp, as an assortment of judges and city councilmen dropped by the clubhouse, on West Forty-fourth Street, to pay their respects. Framed photographs of John F. Kennedy and the Irish Republican leader Gerry Adams hung on the walls, and McManus retreated to the storage room in back, smoking, and "receiving guests like the don of the West Side," as one longtime member put it.

About midway through the party came the announcement that a new club president had been elected—Michael Spillane, whose name evoked an era when, as T. J. English, the author of "The Westies," said recently, "the political apparatus and the criminal element were not that far apart." Spillane, a lawyer, is McManus's nephew, and also the son of Michael (Mickey) Spillane, the so-called Gentleman Gangster—a revered local figure who ran rackets in Hell's Kitchen for nearly two decades before being chased to Queens, in the seventies, by the rival mobster Jimmy Coonan.

The Spillane announcement came as news to Carlos Manzano, the failed candidate and current club president. He had skipped the party in order to take a final exam at N.Y.U., where he is a graduate student. Several club members called him with news of his apparent ouster. Manzano, a Colombian immigrant who had been planning to step down in

March, felt betrayed, and cast himself as a kind of Shark to the Spillane contingent's Jets. "I have always been an outsider," he said, referring to the club's Irish-American roots. He immediately sent an e-mail to the club's mailing list. "Politics does have a sense of humor," the e-mail began. "I heard through the grapevine this morning that someone at the McManus Christmas-Holiday party took over the presidency last night. That was quite a coup d'état. . . . I find this 'Claudius' approach interesting but dangerous." It went on, "While it is not my style to communicate in this form, I thought you should know. After all, we are living on the West Side of Manhattan—not the Wild West (Side)." One club member who received the message said, "There's a lot of Machiavellian stuff going on," and then requested anonymity, adding, "It involves somebody who could crush me."

McManus, meanwhile, dismissed the incident as a misunderstanding caused by an overzealous party m.c., who had failed to point out that Manzano remains president—if a lame duck—for the time being. He showed a visitor around the club, rapping his knuckles against a bronze plaque of his granduncle Thomas J. McManus, who died in 1926. "Look at how they treated leaders in those days," he said.

A woman named Aida followed McManus into the back room and said, "All hail, St. James," bowing slightly before him. She was hoping he could procure some extra tickets to Midnight Mass.

"You got to take care of the neighborhood," McManus said, his hands shaking as he puffed on a Lucky Strike. He talked about how, three decades ago, he helped insure that seventy per cent of the apartments in the Manhattan Plaza high-rise development be reserved for theatrical workers. Manhattan Plaza opened in 1977, the year Mickey Spillane was shot and killed outside his house in Woodside.

Manzano lives in Manhattan Plaza now, though he is unsure of his future role in neighborhood politics. "For one of the classes I was taking, I wrote a fifteen-page marketing plan for the association for the next four years," he said, and he laughed. "There goes my marketing plan."

—Ben McGrath

RUBBISH DEPT.
SHREDDING PARTY

A lot of stuff was shredded when Shred Across America, a seventeen-city document-shredding tour, stopped in Union Square recently. People who had heard about what Staples, the tour's sponsor, was calling "a mobile shredding event" brought over bags of old bills and checks and sensitive financial documents to be shredded. Staples had set up a stage in the park, on which the event's host, Justin Patricoff, demonstrated the store's shredders. Patricoff, a thirty-year-old promotional-tour veteran from Dayton, Ohio, has been on the road for the past three and a half years, most recently as part of the Got Milk? Milk Mustache Tour. "I'll be driving the actual shredding truck," Patricoff said. He motioned toward a twenty-four-foot-long mobile shredding unit, an SF200, that he had driven from Spokane, Washington, where it was built, by a firm called Shredfast, Inc. "It's a family company, and they're like the Orange County Choppers of the shredding-truck industry," he said, standing beneath a banner reading "Shred•Protect•Recycle." "Shredding is really addictive," he added.

In the meantime, Patricoff revved up the crowd. "Do you trust all your friends?" he asked. "You trust special people, that's right! You trust yourself, yes. You trust A No. 1, that's right, buddy!" He solicited identity-theft stories. A guy took the microphone and told a long, incoherent tale punctuated by the words "cops," "house," "my son," "Penn Station," and "got it back." A man who wanted to shred said that his Social Security number was stolen so that someone could purchase a Ford Taurus in his name.

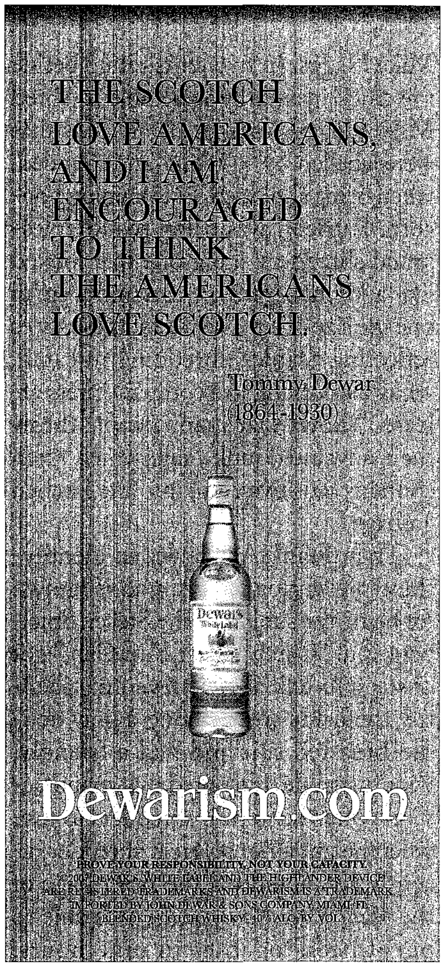
"Now, you're sure you didn't give the Ford Taurus to a neighbor as a gift?" Patricoff asked.

Then he got back to shredding. He shredded junk mail printed specially for the occasion by Staples: a fake-credit-card offer made out to a fake name, Mike Haggs. In two tents set up beside the truck, passersby were able to shred Mike Haggs's mail or blank CDs that were labelled "SHRED ME" and sounded, when being shredded, like popping popcorn. Patricoff was using two Staples-brand shredders: a big one that looked like a kitchen garbage can and a small one the size of a toaster oven, these styles reflecting Staples' shredding research, which, according to a company press release, "shows that many people throw their unwanted junk mail, which often contains sensitive data, into the kitchen garbage."

Then Frank Abagnale, an identity-theft-prevention expert who is known for being the subject of the Steven Spielberg film "Catch Me If You Can," got onstage to talk about preventing identity theft. He was wearing a gray double-breasted suit and had a friendly, winning smile. He noted that manufacturers often send him shredders to test; when he got a not so great shredder recently and shredded the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, he was able to put it back together in nine hours. Offstage, Abagnale, who is fifty-eight, mentioned that while travelling across America—as he has often done since 1974, when he finished serving time for cashing two and a half million dollars in counterfeit checks, in every state and twenty-six countries—he enjoys visiting old stationery stores. Recently, in Des Moines, he found one selling blank checks. "Those were the kind I used to use," he said.

The climax of the event was a shredder giveaway, which, when Patricoff mentioned it, caused the shredding crowd to go wild. But first a giant blue cannister, filled with sensitive financial papers that the onlookers had brought, was hoisted up and emptied out into the bowels of the truck, which began to buck and grind and hum. As the truck continued to shred, the free shredder was given away to Tony Medina, a bus driver on the M9 line who was on his lunch break. ("I have lots of stuff to shred at home," he said.) Peering into the truck through a glass porthole, you could see flurries of finely ground bulk mail and pulverized bank-issued plastic, falling evenly on a white layer of shredded stuff, as if in a big noisy snow globe.

—Robert Sullivan



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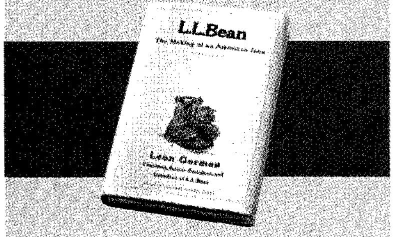

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LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

THE STARTING GATE

Foreign policy divides the Democrats.

BY JEFFREY GOLDBERG

Evan Bayh was uncharacteristically dispirited when I met him in the Russell Senate Office Building on a quiet Wednesday before Christmas. For Bayh, who is fifty-one and was first elected to the Senate from Indiana in 1998, December will be recalled as a low moment in an otherwise high-achieving life. Less than two weeks earlier, he had the bad luck to visit New Hampshire on the same weekend that his junior colleague in the Senate Barack Obama, from Illinois, was also visiting. Bayh spoke to a hundred and fifty supporters in a Manchester restaurant; Obama swept through the state trailed by a hundred and fifty reporters. "We originally scheduled the Rolling Stones for this party," the governor, John Lynch, told fifteen hundred people who paid twenty-five dollars apiece to see Obama in a Manchester ballroom. "But we cancelled them when we realized Senator Obama would sell more tickets."

It was not merely this experience, though, which led Bayh to announce, shortly afterward, that he would not seek the 2008 Democratic nomination for President. He did not lack for money—his finance chief, Nancy Jacobson, had already raised more than ten million dollars—or desire. His father, Birch Bayh, was also an Indiana senator, as well as a failed Presidential candidate, and Bayh had harbored White House ambitions for years. So his decision, made just two weeks after he formed a Presidential exploratory committee, surprised many Democrats.

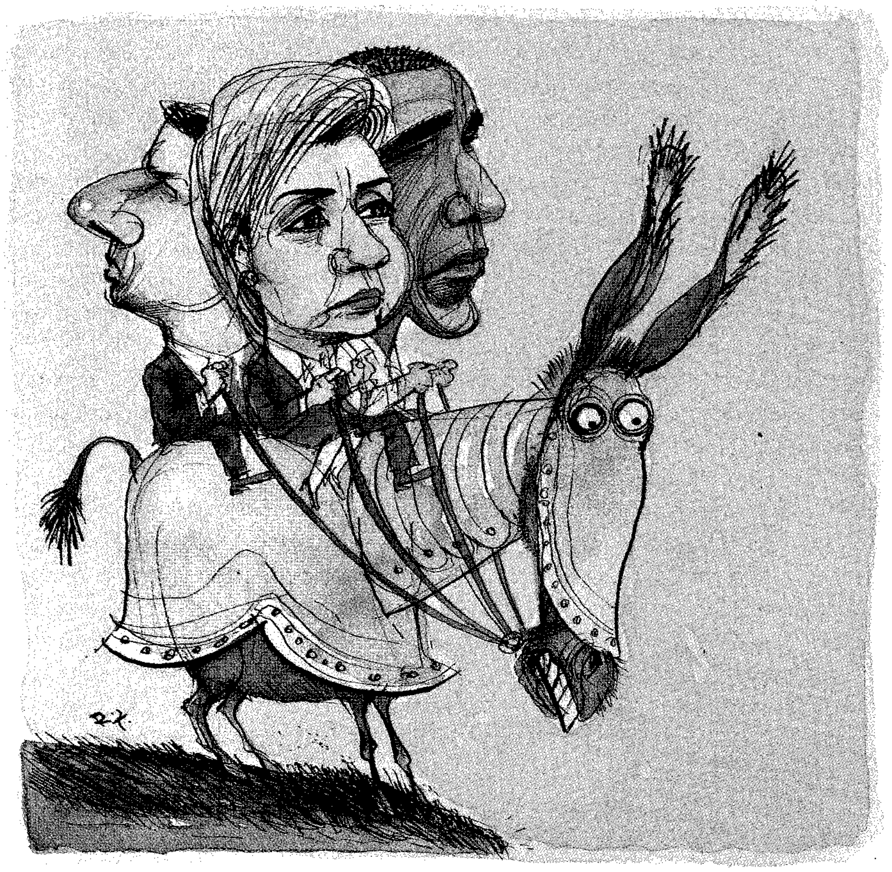
Bayh suggested that he was deterred by the morass in Iraq and, by extension, the challenges posed by Iran. Liberal Democrats, he said, would not respond to his views about the use of American military power. "You just hope that we haven't soured an entire generation on the necessity, from time to time, of using force because Iraq has been such a debacle," he said. "That would be tragic, because Iran is a grave threat. They're everything we thought Iraq was but wasn't. They are seeking nuclear weapons, they do support terrorists, they have threatened to destroy Israel, and they've threatened us, too."

Bayh believes that the American experience in Iraq is turning some Democrats away from the Party's internationalist tradition, and although that split in the Party is not new—it helped to shape the race in 2004—Bayh appears to think that it has become more intense as the next election draws closer. "While we're rightfully pointing out those errors in Iraq, we've got to say very clearly that Afghanistan was the right war to fight," he said. "There are those kinds of tough steps that occasionally involve the use of force. Lots of Americans wonder whether we Democrats have that in us." Bayh, to be sure, is a pragmatist: he saw that he had little chance of penetrating his party's consciousness in time for a 2008 race. "There are too many Goliaths out there," he said, referring to Obama, Clinton, and John Edwards, and he added, with more sharpness than usual, "I believe I would be a very strong general-election candidate," suggesting that the dynamics of the Democratic Party left little room for a semi-obscure, non-dazzling senator whose positions, in particular on the Iraq war, have been fairly hawkish.

Twelve months before the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, foreign policy, and not abortion, gay rights, tax policy, or voters' churchgoing habits, is what seems most to separate Democrats from Republicans and, to some extent, from each other. An early test of the Democratic contenders will be how they approach the Iraq war. Clinton, Edwards, and Obama—at this point, the chief competitors—have many views in common. They tend to see China as an economic challenge rather than as a military threat; they are pro-Israel, and support (Bill) Clinton-style engagement to re-start the Middle East peace process; they all want more commitment in the fight against AIDS. On Iraq, though, and on the uses of American power, there is less unity.

John Edwards (the 2004 Vice-Presidential nominee, who announced his intention to run just after Christmas) has become the candidate of troop withdrawal. When I asked Edwards last week for a concise description of his Iraq position, he said, “Let’s start leaving.” Hillary Clinton, who has not announced her candidacy but is said to be close to doing so, is a connoisseur of statecraft, the candidate of the Democratic foreign-policy élite. She brings the most experience in foreign policy to the race—much of it gained vicariously, in her husband’s White House. Unlike Edwards, she sees the loss of Iraq as potentially catastrophic for American national-security interests.

Obama, who has strongly hinted at a possible candidacy, is the pleaser; he can be rhetorically hawkish, but seems most comfortable when advocating the softer forms of American power. He told me that a quick pullout from Iraq “could result in a spike in deaths,” but he does not talk about looming catastrophe if Iraq is not stabilized. His tone is relentlessly measured and sometimes banal; in his best-selling book, “The Audacity of Hope,” a chapter on foreign affairs reads like a tentative primer on the history of American foreign policy. Obama speaks at length of a trip to Iraq, but barely mentions the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea. Still, he would enter the race for President with one clear advantage: he did not support the Iraq war, even at its inception.



Contesting the uses of power: John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama.

RICHARD THOMPSON

Democrats are doubtful about the usefulness of an increase in troop levels. Obama, who does not use the euphemism “surge,” favored by the Administration, but, rather, “escalation,” said, “I don’t know any military expert who says that a modest increase in troop levels is going to make a big difference. Even if you pursue the logic of increased troop levels, you’re going to need one hundred thousand more, one hundred and fifty thousand more, orders of magnitude that we don’t possess. Twenty thousand troops is not going to make a difference anymore.” Clinton says that she has doubts but will withhold judgment until she sees President Bush’s actual plan.

Clinton, Edwards, and Obama view themselves as internationalists—eager to keep America engaged in the world and willing to employ force if necessary. And yet, if polls are to be trusted, this outlook separates them from their party’s base. A 2005 poll conducted by the Democratic-affiliated Security and Peace Institute found that the top two foreign-policy priorities of Republicans were the destruction of Al Qaeda and a halt to nuclear proliferation; Democrats named the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the elimination of AIDS. Grassroots Democratic opposition to the Iraq war has been especially potent; it cost Senator Joseph Lieberman the support of Democrats in his primary fight last year. Polls also show that a sizable minority of Democrats now feel that the war in Afghanistan was a mistake—thirty-five per cent, according to an M.I.T. survey conducted in November of 2005. Even more noteworthy, only fifty-seven per cent of Democrats questioned in the same poll would support the deployment of U.S. troops against a known terrorist camp. A German Marshall Fund poll in June of last year found that seventy per cent of Republicans would approve of military action as a last resort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, as opposed to only forty-one per cent of Democrats. As the *New Republic* editor-at-large Peter Beinart, who has argued for a more assertive Democratic foreign policy, notes in an essay that will appear in a forthcoming collection produced by the Brookings and Hoover Institutions, “America’s red-blue divide is no longer chiefly between churched and unchurched. It is between hawk and dove.” He is not alone in arguing that Bush has done something that would have seemed impossible in late 2001: he has turned the fight against terrorism into a partisan issue.

“This is an exceedingly strange moment, but a plastic moment,” said Jeremy Rosner, a former Clinton Administration National Security Council official and now a Democratic pollster. “I tend to think that, once Bush and Iraq are off the screen, someone might be able to rally Democrats to an enlightened internationalism, but the data on that point is mixed right now.”

The Democratic Party’s base may be

dovish, but it accounts for less than twenty-five per cent of the American voting public. It is difficult, therefore, to imagine a serious general-election candidate who does not favor some sort of "enlightened internationalism," with its possible military implications. (Lieberman's ultimate victory as an Independent seemed to demonstrate that dovish voters, even in a liberal state such as Connecticut, cannot by themselves unseat a hawkish senator.) But the Democratic Party's chief problem may be finding a way to arrive at a coherent and persuasive post-Bush foreign policy. Michael E. O'Hanlon, of the Brookings Institution, and Kurt M. Campbell, a former National Security Council official under Bill Clinton, argue in a recent book, "Hard Power: The Politics of National Security," that Bush Administration incompetence, not Democratic foreign-policy wisdom, accounts for the Democrats' success in last November's midterm election. "Without answers of their own to the questions they pose to the Bush Administration about how to keep the country safe and secure, Democrats are likely to find current gains in national polls to be fleeting or illusory," they wrote. They might have added that, whether or not the public hopes for a period of international tranquillity, the next President, Democrat or Republican, will inherit an extraordinarily difficult set of problems.

"It's not a great bargain for the next President to take over the mess in Iraq," Obama told me last month. "But there is as much pressure in both the Republican and Democratic camps, because both have genuine concern for the troops and the families and the budget. It won't be good for congressmen of the President's party if we're still spending two billion dollars a week in Iraq in two years."

Obama, like his rivals, would rather not see the Democrats take the blame for what recent events suggest will be an unhappy dénouement in Iraq. But many foreign-policy experts believe that, even without an increase in troop levels in the coming months, Bush may yet succeed in delaying the day of reckoning until the next President takes office. "Bush is going to do anything he can do in his power not to lose," Leslie Gelb, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a onetime State Department official in the Carter Administration, said. "The worst challenge the next President will inherit will be to figure out how to lose in Iraq without the appearance or effects of losing. Then, there are these huge problems at either end of Asia—Iran and North Korea. The next President is heading into the biggest, most dangerous set of problems that we've faced since the Cuban missile crisis."

On September 12, 2001, Hillary Clinton gave a speech on the Senate floor in which she sounded much like President Bush, saying that the country should "make very clear that not only those who harbor terrorists but those who in any way give any aid or comfort whatsoever will now face the wrath of our country." She added, "You are either with America in our time of need or you are not."

When we met recently in her office in the Russell building, I mentioned that speech, calling it "pretty pugnacious."

"Well, I *was* pretty pugnacious," she said, laughing. "Post-9/11, that was appropriate language." She has since been critical of Bush's leadership of the war on terror, and in particular his handling of Iraq. She agrees with Gelb that the next President will inherit a set of foreign-policy challenges that will make her husband's 1993 White House transition seem (to borrow a term from the run-up to the Iraq war) like a cakewalk.

Clinton speaks with confidence and directness. On issues of foreign policy and national security, she readily said "I don't know" when she didn't, and she referred frequently, without self-consciousness, to her husband's experience, especially in the Middle East and in the Balkans, perhaps as a way of signalling that nothing prepares a person for four years in the White House like eight years in the White House. She seems to have assimilated data on a comprehensive range of issues. In one conversation, I asked her whether she believed that the best antidote to Islamism might be Islamism itself—in other words, for Muslims to experience periods of Islamist rule to fully grasp its flaws. "Well, I don't see any evidence of that," she said. "You know, if you look around the world, Islamists have had to be defeated by internal military forces, in such places as Algeria and the Philippines, or by external military forces, in places like Afghanistan. We want to be able to continue to export democracy, but we want to deliver it in digestible packages. We want to be smart about this. Take the Palestinians, where we had an election. Don't you think it would have been smart to make sure that the election was run in such a way that everyone knew how to compete? Hamas certainly knew how to compete. They ran a modern election. They knew enough to run only one person in each constituency, unlike Fatah, which we apparently didn't tell. Hamas had a cell-phone system to get

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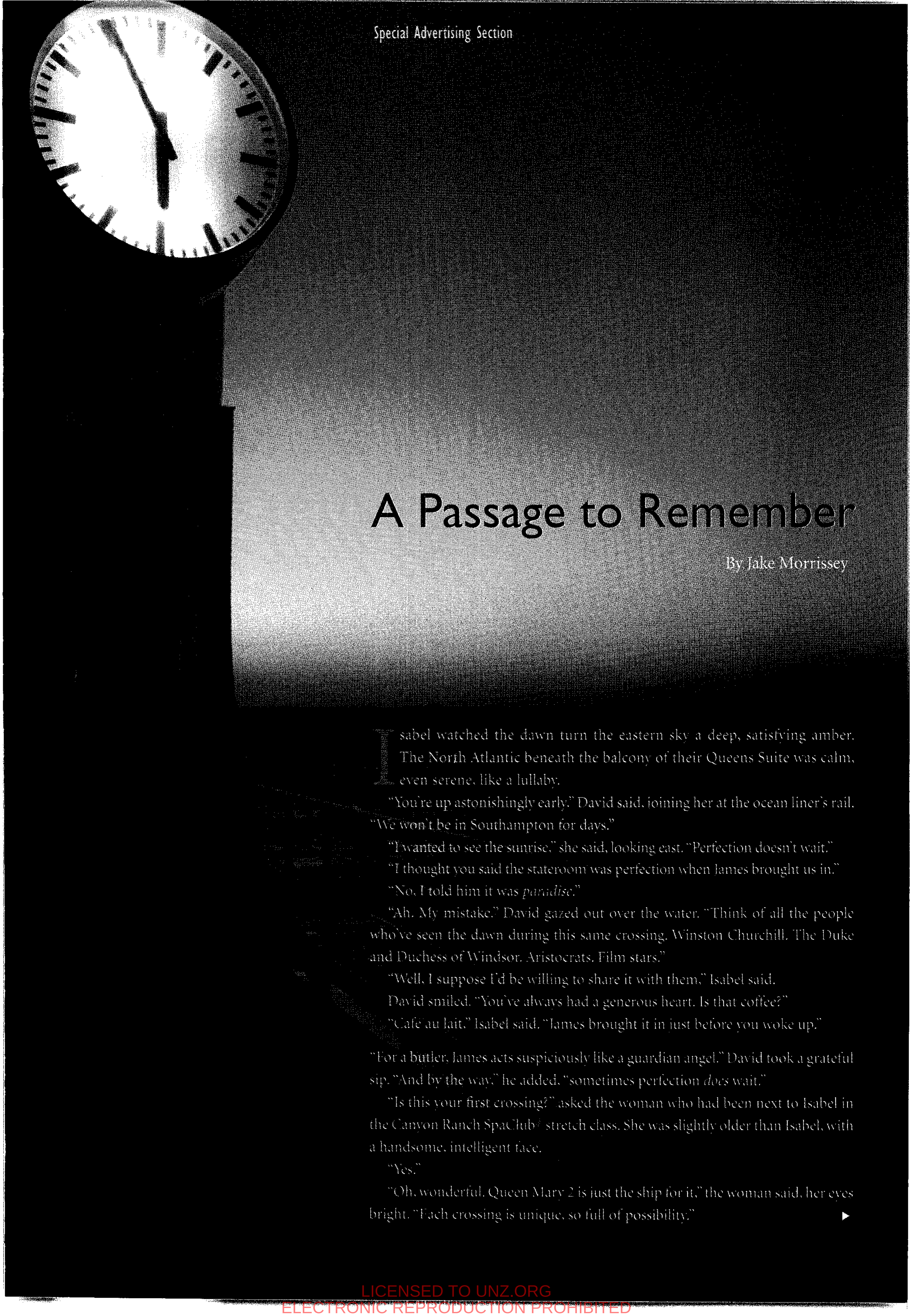


A Passage to Remember

By Jake Morrissey

Isabel watched the dawn turn the eastern sky a deep, satisfying amber. The North Atlantic beneath the balcony of their Queens Suite was calm, even serene, like a lullaby.

"You're up astonishingly early," David said, joining her at the ocean liner's rail. "We won't be in Southampton for days."

"I wanted to see the sunrise," she said, looking east. "Perfection doesn't wait."

"I thought you said the stateroom was perfection when James brought us in."

"No, I told him it was *paradise*."

"Ah. My mistake." David gazed out over the water. "Think of all the people who've seen the dawn during this same crossing. Winston Churchill. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Aristocrats. Film stars."

"Well, I suppose I'd be willing to share it with them," Isabel said.

David smiled. "You've always had a generous heart. Is that coffee?"

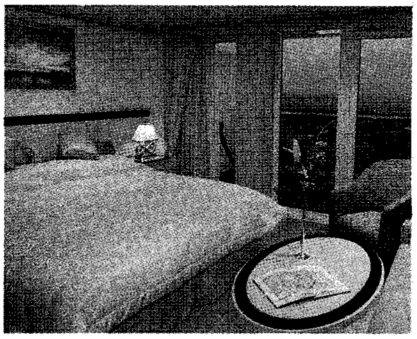
"Café au lait," Isabel said. "James brought it in just before you woke up."

"For a butler, James acts suspiciously like a guardian angel." David took a grateful sip. "And by the way," he added, "sometimes perfection *does* wait."

"Is this your first crossing?" asked the woman who had been next to Isabel in the Canyon Ranch SpaClub® stretch class. She was slightly older than Isabel, with a handsome, intelligent face.

"Yes."

"Oh, wonderful. Queen Mary 2 is just the ship for it," the woman said, her eyes bright. "Each crossing is unique, so full of possibility." ▶



"Possibility for what?"

"Romance. Adventure. Peace. Excitement. Whatever you're looking for."

Isabel pondered this during her massage. As the masseuse eased the tension from her muscles and the soothing scents of rosemary and ginger filled the room, Isabel began to understand what the woman had meant about possibility. *Maybe that's what paradise is*, she thought. *Whatever you're looking for.*

David was surprised at how much he enjoyed his run. The promenade deck was two thousand feet around and circled the entire ship, which gave him an uninterrupted view of ocean—a vista that had inspired explorers and adventurers for centuries. And now it did the same for him. He seemed to run farther and faster aboard than he did on land.

Perhaps it was the day. The sky was a crisp blue, the sea air was both warm but invigorating, and whitecaps skittered playfully across the Atlantic, as if challenging David to push himself.

"You were keeping a good pace," one of the other runners, a trim, older man with an easy manner, said as they both leaned against the rail to catch their breath.

"I haven't done that in years," David said. "Maybe I run better out here."

"A lot of people feel that way," the man said. "It's one of the mysteries of a crossing."

"I don't know what I'm doing," David whispered to Isabel as they stood on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre with a dozen people, including the woman and man who had spoken to them earlier, Miriam and Arthur.

"You'll be fine, just pay attention," Isabel said.

"Remember to listen to the other actors who are on stage with you," the actor leading the workshop told them. "Good acting comes from understanding what the other person is saying and reacting to it." He pointed to Isabel and David. "Would you two like to go first?"

David and Isabel faced each other under the lights. David stole a look into the empty red seats and realized that in a few hours actors from the esteemed Royal Academy of Dramatic Art would be standing where he was, entertaining more than a thousand people. This afternoon, the spotlight was on two uncertain amateurs.

"For your scene," the actor told them, "I want one of you to show the other around paradise—it can be Heaven, or the Garden of Eden, or whatever you think paradise looks like. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," David said. To Isabel he whispered, "I wonder if James has ever been portrayed showing a young couple their stateroom before."

She grinned. "You are such a ham."

"I don't think I've ever laughed harder in my life," Arthur said as the waiter, wearing an impeccable white jacket and gloves, placed a plate of warm scones with fresh cream and jam on the table. Afternoon tea was filled with the cheerful chatter of new friends getting acquainted and old friends catching up. The late day sunlight was bathing the tables near the windows in an agreeable golden glow.

"David expresses himself vividly in moments of crisis," Isabel said just before biting into a cucumber and watercress sandwich.

"He stayed completely in character," Miriam said as she selected a strawberry. "I believed every word he said. I was sure I *saw* the imaginary deck chair that he tripped over. I really did."

"Thank you, Miriam," David said, "and I defy any of you to stay composed when a dozen people are watching every move you make and critiquing it."

"I never said you weren't composed, darling, just uncoordinated," Isabel said.

David leaned back into the trim club chair. "I never knew acting could be such strenuous work. But I think I have room for one more pastry."

For the Black & White Ball gala that evening, Isabel chose a dress of silk charmeuse and wore the diamond stud earrings David had given her as a wedding present. David wore his tuxedo with a silver tie. Miriam and Arthur joined them at their table near the Queens Room's

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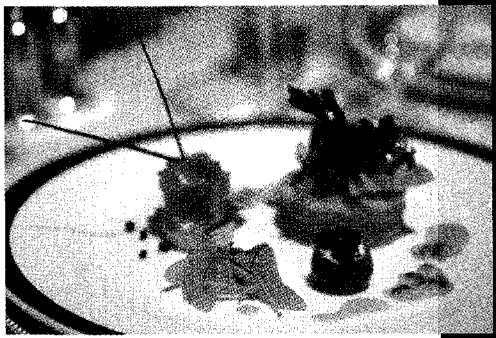

vast and inviting dance floor. Under the crystal chandeliers and surrounded by the sounds of a live orchestra playing everything from Ellington to Gershwin, Isabel and David moved effortlessly across the gleaming inlaid parquet, as if they had never danced with anyone else.

The clouds in the east were low and a light breeze was blowing off the sea.

"Miriam and Arthur dance well together," Isabel said as she and David stood on their balcony.

"We weren't terrible either," he said as he put his jacket over her shoulders.

"I only stepped on your feet four times," Isabel said.

"Five."

"It's impolite to keep count."

"The sun is rising," David changed the subject.

"Let's stay up and watch it," Isabel said.

"Nothing will compare to the perfect one you saw yesterday, will it?"

Isabel looked at the thin line of rose light that traced the curve of the earth. She thought about the day she'd had, about their elegant and welcoming stateroom, with the bed's covers turned down and a delicate dark chocolate on each pillow. She looked again at David, who after all this time still made her smile.

"Every sunrise is perfect on a crossing," she said. "Didn't you know?"

(Jake Morrissey is the author of "A Genius in the Design: Bernini, Borromini, and the Rivalry That Transformed Rome" *and the historical thriller* "A Weekend at Blenheim."*)*

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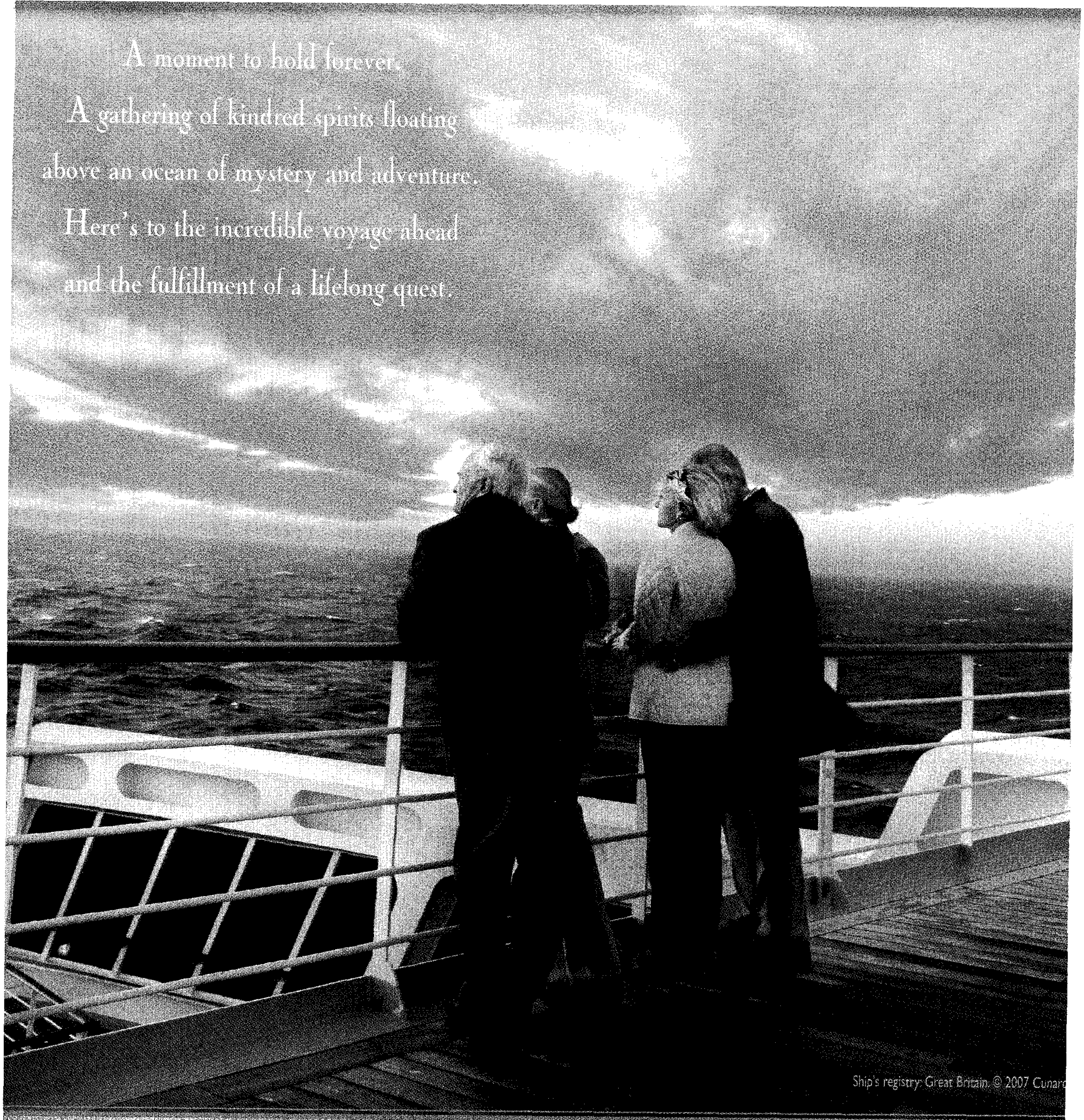
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everyone to the polls. It's not enough to say, 'Let's have an election.' If you're going to do it and install democracy, democracy means rule of law, it means democracy education, democracy means opening up the media."

She went on, "That's what we did during the Cold War. We had a multipronged agenda against Communism and the Soviet Union, we worked with candidates and parties in Europe, we worked to persuade people to be part of our alliance, we used every tool at our disposal." Clinton seemed just moments away from naming individual Hamas precinct captains.

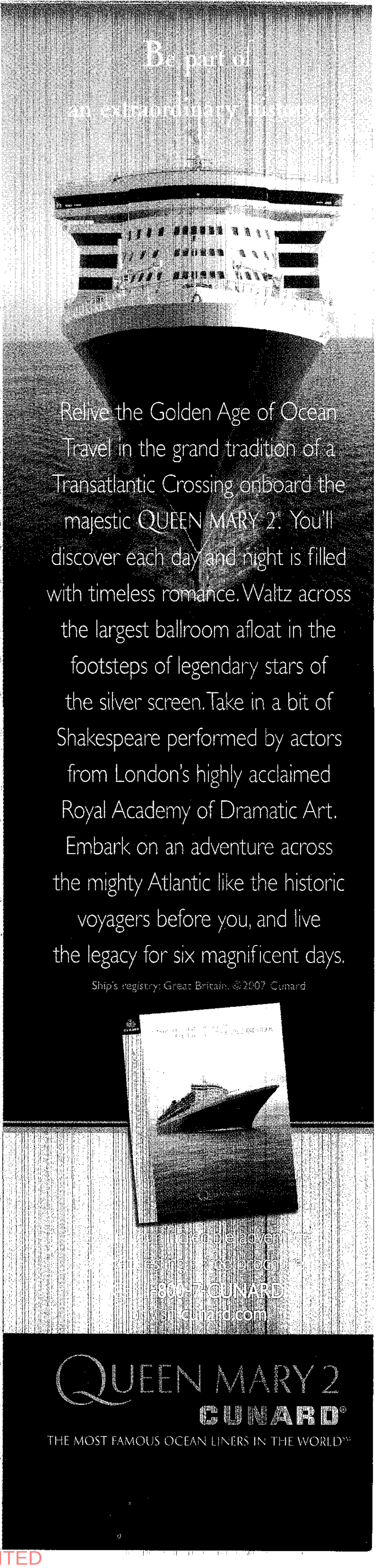
When I asked Clinton to place herself on a foreign-policy continuum in which Brent Scowcroft, President George H. W. Bush's national-security adviser, represents the realists, and Paul Wolfowitz, the former Deputy Defense Secretary, represents the armed idealism of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists, she demurred. "I'm me," she said. "Here's Clinton. I'm not either one of them. I think both of their approaches are not adequate to the task we are facing. I think Wolfowitz's strong feelings and deeply held values come out of the Holocaust, come out of an understanding of the need to expand universal values and create a climate in which people would stand up and fight for those human rights. I think it is real with Wolfowitz, but I think in pursuit of policies people see things that are not real."

She continued, "On the other hand, if you entered the world arena and see it just as a series of Realpolitik transactions, you also miss the larger picture. We can critique the idealists, who have an almost faith-based idealism without adequate understanding or evidence-based decision-making, and we can critique the realists for rejecting the importance of aspiration and values in foreign policy. You know, I find myself, as I often do, in the somewhat lonely middle."

Obama (like Clinton and Bayh) has studiously calibrated his approach to Iraq. Although he cannot be considered one of Congress's foreign-policy experts, it is hard to think of another recent graduate of the Illinois Senate who could speak as comfortably as he does about the arcana of the Middle East. Obama is discomfited by those on the left who, in his view, minimize the threat of terrorism. In his recent book, he even scolds those who put the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and the improvement of relations with America's allies, ahead of national-security concerns. "The objectives favored by liberals have merit," he writes. "But they hardly constitute a coherent national security policy." He adds that "the threats facing the United States today are real, multiple, and potentially devastating." But when he writes that it's "useful to remind ourselves, then, that Osama bin Laden is not Ho Chi Minh," it's hard to imagine who would confuse the two.

Obama has not yet articulated an overarching national-security world view; the political danger in doing so is that it could alienate him from a wing of his party at a time when he's just becoming widely known. In a conversation last month, he focussed on some of the most worrisome issues facing the United States, saying that the possibility of Al Qaeda or another terrorist group obtaining a nuclear weapon was "the No. 1 threat" facing America, and he warned that deterrence theories might not apply to the regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang. "Just because they're state actors doesn't mean they might not act irrationally," he said. "We can't gauge their decision-making process accurately, partly because our intelligence capabilities have been entirely inadequate to the task, and partly due to the nature of the regimes. Whatever you want to say about the Soviets, they were essentially conservative. The North Korean regime and the Iranians are driven more by ideology and fantasy." On the other hand, he is hesitant to describe a scenario in which he would actually use force against those regimes.

"What I don't want to see happen is for Iraq to become an excuse for us to ignore misery or human-rights violations or genocide," Obama said. "We should be engaged in Darfur. We have a self-interest and a stake in preventing hundreds of thousands of people from being slaughtered." (Obama's policy prescription for Darfur, though, is more modest than his rhetoric: he wants to build an "international protective force" in Darfur to buttress the African troops already there.) Democratic Party real-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ism, he said, should reflect the country's moral values. He cited the coup, in 1953, against the Iranian President, Mohammed Mossadegh, aided by the C.I.A., as an example of American values gone awry. "Iran is a classic case of something biting us on the ankle, when we assisted in overthrowing the democratically elected regime that was replaced by the Shah," he said.

In his less cautious pre-Senate days, Obama expressed his view of the world more bluntly. In a 2002 speech at an antiwar rally in Chicago, he condemned Middle Eastern autocrats, and condemned President Bush (and, it is possible to infer, previous Presidents of both parties) for coddling pro-American dictators in the name of stability. "Let's fight to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East, the Saudis and the Egyptians, stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality, and mismanaging their economies, so that their youth grow up without education, without prospects, without hope, the ready recruits of terrorist cells."

I asked Obama if his sympathy for the victims of civil war and ethnic cleansing takes in the mass of Iraqis who are victims, and not the perpetrators, of the current violence. "We absolutely have an obligation to the Iraqi people," he said. "That's why I've resisted calls for an immediate withdrawal."

John Edwards, by contrast, argues that America has fulfilled its commitment to the Iraqi people. "We've been there for a few years," he said. "We've devoted enormous resources, human and otherwise. And now we've reached the place, I think, where the Iraqis are going to have to take responsibility." I asked if he believed that America had a moral responsibility to the Iraqis because the Bush Administration chose to topple a dictatorship, only to replace it, albeit inadvertently, with chaos and what looks like civil war.

"My view of Darfur is, we've done nothing but yap. We—as a lot of American families can tell you—we've done a lot more than talk in Iraq. And I think you just reach a place where you have to say, 'We've done our part, and now it's time for them to step up to the plate.' You can't police places forever." When I suggested that Iraqis who "step up to the plate," in the manner that Edwards suggests, are sometimes beheaded, he responded, "But when they're doing it to each other, and America's not there and not fomenting the situation, I think the odds are better of the place stabilizing. I mean, ultimately, that's the judgment."

Edwards unequivocally recommends the immediate withdrawal of forty thousand troops, a position that may help to explain his popularity: in one poll last month in Iowa, Edwards and Obama were tied for first place, each supported by twenty-two per cent of likely Democratic caucus-goers. Iowa's outgoing governor, Tom Vilsack, who is also an announced candidate, was backed by twelve per cent of likely caucus-goers, and Hillary Clinton was polling at about ten per cent.

It sometimes seems that Edwards is running in a different election than Obama and Clinton. He is focussed on next year's primaries, building support among union members and among Democrats infuriated by the Bush Administration's Iraq policy. Obama and Clinton seem focussed instead on the general election. Edwards disputes this notion. "Well, I call the surge idea 'the McCain doctrine,' " he said, laughing. When I mentioned how Obama and Clinton have approached the Iraq issue, he said, "They may be trying to run for President, too, you mean?" He insisted that his tack on Iraq was "nonpolitical," and added, "I think the political position is to be cautious. There are consequences to taking positions, but leadership in this situation requires you to make clear what you think should happen in Iraq."

In his announcement speeches, Edwards called for "getting America and the world to break our addiction to oil" but did not mention counterterrorism as a top priority, which sets him apart from the current Democratic field. Rather, he emphasized universal health care, ending poverty, and combatting global warming.

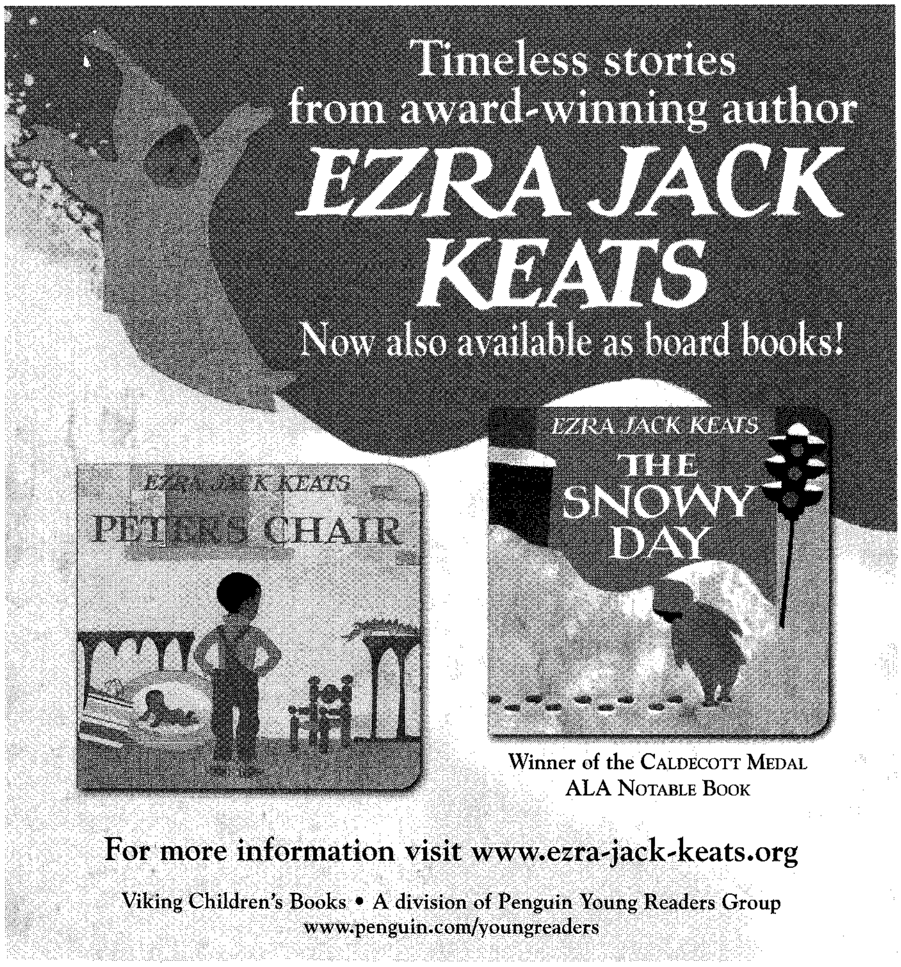
I met with Edwards in New York, just after he delivered a speech to the Asia Society about a recent trip he had made to China. During the question-and-answer period, he gave perfunctory responses to a series of questions, and seemed most engaged when the conversation turned to domestic policy. "I could go on all day about this," he said.

When I asked about his relative inexperience in foreign policy, he said, overenthusiastically, "I love this stuff. I think it is the critical thing for the next President of the United States, and whether it is Uganda and Darfur, or the Middle East, or China, or India, or Europe, I just find it fascinating. And I think the President of the United States has to have a very strong, clear vision about how to engage the world."

Edwards is careful not to rule out the use of military force against Iran, but he would much rather talk about other things—his recent interest in Africa, and his antipoverty ideas, which are at the core of his candidacy. Edwards is genial in conversation, but he became almost testy when I brought up his vote, in 2002, in favor of the Iraq-war resolution. Edwards has repudiated his vote, unlike Clinton, who has not renounced her own support for the war despite demands from her backers that she do so. Edwards worries that his vote will be seen as evidence that he was somehow fooled by the Administration into giving it his support. "I was convinced that Saddam had chemical and biological weapons and was doing everything in his power to get nuclear weapons," he said. "There was some disparity in the information I had about how far along he was in that process. I didn't rely on George Bush for that. And I personally think there's some dishonesty in suggesting that members of the United States Senate relied on George Bush for that information, because I don't think it's true. It's great politics. But it's not the truth."

When I asked who was making this suggestion, he said, "I've just heard people say, I can't even tell you who, I've just heard people say, 'Well, you know, George Bush . . . misled us.' You know, it's just— I was there, it's not what happened." (Edwards would not single out anyone, but he appeared to be referring to, among others, his 2004 running mate, John Kerry, who has often said that he was lied to by the Bush Administration about W.M.D.s. "We were misled. We were given evidence that was not true," Kerry told a rally of liberal Democrats in June of last year.)

"I was on the Intelligence Committee," Edwards went on, "so I got direct information from the intelligence community. And then I had a series of meetings with former Clinton Administration people. And they were all saying the same thing. Everything I was hearing in the Intelligence Committee was the same thing I was hearing from these guys. And there was nary a dissenting voice. And so, for me, the difficult judgment was not about the factual information, which I was convinced was accurate. It was about whether I was going to give authority to this Pres-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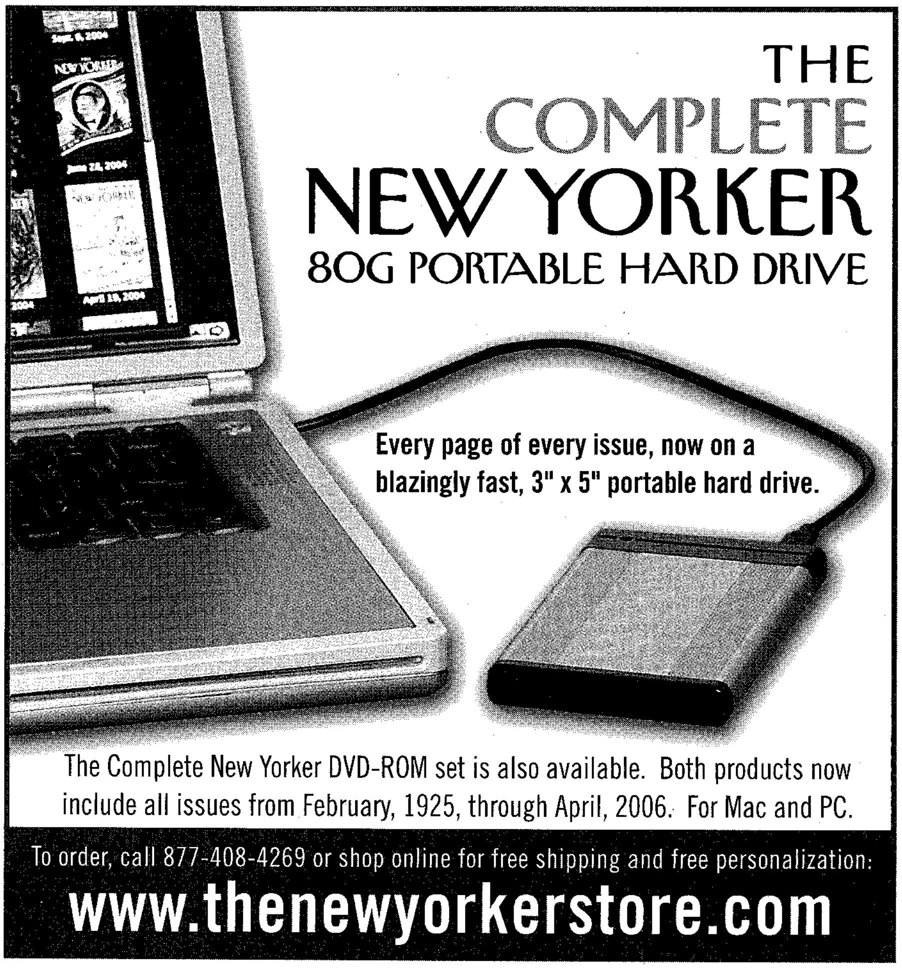
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ident I didn't trust. That was where the friction was for me. I decided to do it, and I was wrong. I shouldn't have done it."

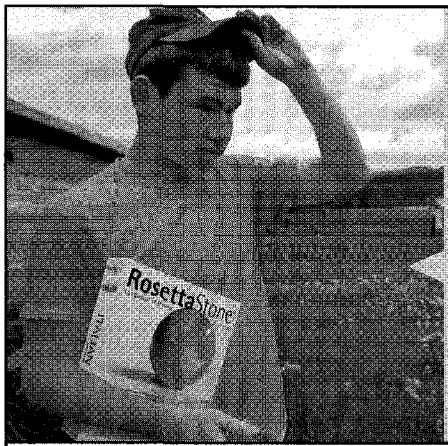
Hillary Clinton's decision to give Bush her approval in 2002 was influenced by her recent White House experience. "I have respect for Presidential decision-making and I saw what the Republican Congress had done to Bill on a range of issues, denying him the authority to deal with Bosnia and Kosovo and second-guessing him on every imaginable issue," she said. "And I don't think that that's good for the country, and I had no problem in giving President Bush the authority to do what he stated he would do and what I was assured privately on many occasions would be done."

Still, Clinton was never an enthusiastic supporter of the war. In a speech to the Senate before casting her vote to support the resolution, she cautioned Bush, saying, "If we were to attack Iraq now, alone or with few allies, it would set a precedent that could come back to haunt us. In recent days, Russia has talked of an invasion of Georgia to attack Chechen rebels. India has mentioned the possibility of a preëmptive strike on Pakistan. And what if China were to perceive a threat from Taiwan? So, Mr. President, for all its appeal, a unilateral attack, while it cannot be ruled out, on the present facts is not a good option."

When I asked Clinton if she thought that she had been lied to, she said, "I have to tell you, I think that they believed, as I believed, that there was, at the very least, residual weapons of mass destruction, and whether the Iraqis ever intended to let the inspectors go forward was being answered year by year. There was a lot of evidence that this was not their intention."

Obama wasn't in the Senate at the time of the invasion of Iraq, and in his 2002 Chicago speech he prophesied some of the difficulties that the Bush Administration is now experiencing. "I suffer no illusions about Saddam Hussein," he said then. "He is a brutal man. A ruthless man. A man who butchers his own people to secure his own power. The world, and the Iraqi people, would be better off without him. But I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors." He went on, "I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences."

A year before the primaries, the Democrats certainly have solid contenders for the Presidency, each of whom—some more than others—is struggling to design a credible series of foreign-policy beliefs for a party that has foreign-policy inclinations but no reigning philosophy. Obama and Clinton appear thus far to be the Party's strongest potential candidates, and each brings strengths to the debate. Obama's foresight on Iraq may be one of his most potent weapons, just as Clinton's expertise, and essential centrism, will be an asset to her candidacy. For now, though, Edwards has something that the others lack: a position on Iraq that resonates best with his party. ♦



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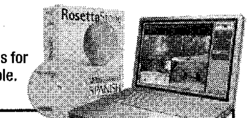

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FIRST LOVE

BY PAUL RUDNICK

In a recent interview in *People*, the President and Mrs. Bush were asked, regarding their daughters, "Do you have a favorite Christmas memory of them as little children?" Mrs. Bush replied, "I love to tell the girls this story. They would always help me decorate the tree, and then we'd have hot chocolate. Once when they were really little, I said, 'Sit under the tree'—and it makes me want to weep—'and I'll go make the hot chocolate.' And I came back and they were so literal. They were squished under the branches, sitting way back by the trunk of the tree waiting for their hot chocolate."

Happily, a complete transcript of the First Parents' fond reminiscences has now become available:

Mrs. Bush: Those girls were always such imps. I remember, when they were about five, they were acting very hyper, and tossing their toys around, so I told them to chill out. And then I couldn't find them until the next morning, when the cook opened our top-loading freezer, and there were the twins, blue and a touch rigid, but otherwise completely unharmed.

The President: And that summer I caught Jenna staring at an ice-cream cone, and she told me, "I know just what it's thinking."

Mrs. Bush: And, sweetheart, do you remember when we were sending them off on their first day of school? I left them at the bus stop and I said, "Just wait right here." And they did. And then the school called, looking for them—

The President: —and we finally had to call the police!

Mrs. Bush: And there they were, still sitting at that bus stop. I told them, "Tomorrow morning, get *on* the bus."

The President: And the next day I told them, "And then get *off* the bus."

Mrs. Bush: I love them so much! Then, when they were a little older, I decided to tell them the facts of life. And I sat them down and I said, "When the daddy loves the mommy very much, he plants a tiny seed inside her, and then the seed grows into a baby."

The President: And I added, "Or sometimes the seed splits into a genetic mutation, and you get a two-headed calf, or twins."

Mrs. Bush: Then I explained that when the mommy is about to have the baby her tummy gets nice and round. And Jenna asked, "So is Grandma Bar always going to have a baby?" It was so adorable, and, when I told that to your mother, how she chortled! And then she told Jenna that, no, she wasn't going to have any more babies, and that Mrs. Clinton was a man.

The President: It's all about family, isn't it?

Mrs. Bush: Oh, and this is so touching: When Jenna was a teen-ager, a friend offered her marijuana. She told us about it, and you said, "Just always ask yourself, 'What would Jesus do?' " And we left her in the White House chapel, staring up at our Saviour on the Cross.

The President: And later that day I glanced out the window of the Oval Office, and there was Jenna, puffing on a joint, and then holding out her arms and saying, "Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch!"

Mrs. Bush: Oh, and one time Barbara came to me and told me that all her friends were getting tattoos, and she asked if she could get one, too. I said, "Well, if all your friends were getting high on crystal meth and holding up a convenience store, would you do that, too?" That really gave her something to think about. And she came back to me the next day and she said, "I've thought about what you said, about the convenience store. And I decided that, yes, I would."

The President: So she got that tattoo!

Mrs. Bush: She outsmarted me!

The President: We didn't see that one coming!

Mrs. Bush: But when the girls were in college, and they were actually caught using fake I.D.s to buy liquor, we really had to sit them down.

The President: And I told them, "I'm not mad at you, I'm just disappointed in you."

Mrs. Bush: And the two of them just beamed, and Jenna said, "Yay! As long as you're not mad!"

The President: I was just so damn proud of them.

Mrs. Bush: And just the other day they came to me and asked me how I felt about premarital sex. And I said that I felt it was wrong, and Jenna asked, "O.K., maybe for Barbara, but what about for me?" And I said that for all young people premarital sex can lead to heartache and sexually transmitted diseases. And Barbara asked, "Even for the girls?" And I said, "For everyone." And Jenna asked, "But what about Mary Cheney? Since lesbians can't get married, how can they have premarital sex?" And that was a puzzler, so finally I just said that, given Mary's hair style and jawline, she's allowed to have any sex she can get.

The President: Nice save!

Mrs. Bush: And now Mary's pregnant. And Barbara phoned me and she wondered, "But how did that happen?" And I explained that Mary and her partner probably used a sperm donor. And Barbara said, "Whoa. You mean it's like donating money or old clothes to the needy, only it's sticky?" And I said yes, and then Jenna said that she was going to organize a holiday harvest, to donate sperm to the homeless.

The President: O.K., here's a secret: I love Jenna best. ♦

From the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

For the past two years, he has shown dramatic video footage of healed rats walking to scientific gatherings and during campaign events to promote California's $3 billion bond measure to fund stem cell work, which passed in November.

Well, they do tend to get dirty looks on the subway.

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PERSONAL HISTORY

PLAYOFFS

Things that are prohibited.

BY SHALOM AUSLANDER

When I was a child, my parents and teachers told me about a man who was very strong. They told me that he could lift mountains. They told me that he could part the sea. They told me that it was important to keep this man happy: when we obeyed what the man had commanded, he liked us. He liked us so much that he killed anyone who didn't like us. But when we didn't obey what he had commanded the man didn't like us at all. He hated us. Some days he hated us so much that he killed us; other days he let other people kill us. We call these days "holidays." On Purim, we remember how the Persians tried to kill us. On Passover, we remember how the Egyptians tried to kill us. On Hanukkah, we remember how the Greeks tried to kill us.

"Blessed is He," we prayed.

As bad as these punishments could be, they were nothing compared with the vengeance the man himself meted out: plagues, famines, floods. Hitler may have killed the Jews, but this man drowned the world. This was the song we sang about him in kindergarten:

God is here,
God is there.
God is truly everywhere!

Then snacks, and a fitful nap.

I was raised in the largely Orthodox Jewish town of Monsey, New York. Saturday mornings found me dressed in a sky-blue suit and brown clip-on tie, walking the leafy streets to synagogue. My father marched alongside me in a starched white shirt and a gray fedora, his heels hammering the pavement as we overtook the slower members of the congregation. Every so often, a car passed by—people from the nearby towns of Suffern and Pomona, out for a scenic drive—and I would feel a surge of pride at the solemn picture we made: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, all of us out to warm ourselves by the soothing fire of our belief. Then my father would step into the road and shake his fist, shouting at the drivers to slow the hell down.

"*Ahnta-Semitin*," he grumbled in Yiddish. Anti-Semites. "Kill a Jew, then you'll be happy."

Monsey was a pretty town where everything was forbidden. One was forbidden to drive on the Sabbath, one was forbidden to take four steps without a yarmulke, one was forbidden to eat meat with dairy. Having eaten meat, one had to abstain from dairy for six hours; having eaten dairy, one had to abstain from meat for three hours. One was always forbidden to eat pig, at least until the Messiah arrived—only then, Rabbi Goldfisher taught us in the fourth grade, would the wicked be punished, the dead be resurrected, and the pigs be kosher.

"Yay!" I said, high-fiving my best friend, Dov.

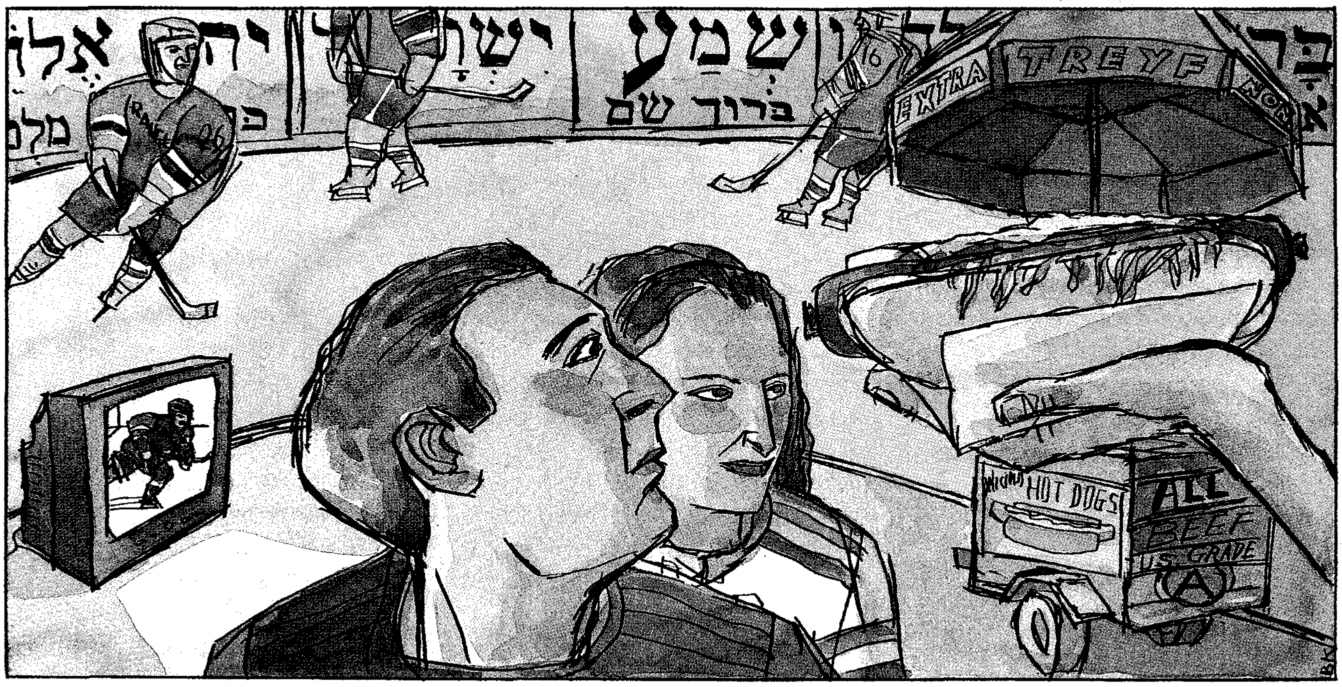
Rabbi Goldfisher fixed a furious gaze upon us.

"You should be so excited," he said, "on the Day of God's Judgment."

The people of Monsey were terrified of God, and they taught me to be terrified of Him, too. I learned that Sarah would one day laugh at Him, so He made her barren; that Job, completely ruined, had asked "Why?" and God had come down to earth, taken him by the collar, and howled, "Who the hell do you think you are?" In early autumn, when the leaves choked, turned colors, and fell to their deaths, everyone gathered together in synagogues across the town and wondered, aloud and in unison, how God was going to kill them: *Who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, who by plague, who by strangulation and who by stoning.*

Then lunch, and a fitful nap.

At twenty-one, the age at which my rabbis declared a young man should be fathering a child, I found myself living in a studio apartment in Manhattan, where the bookshelves sagged with the weight of Judaism's holiest books and the collection of pornographic magazines I kept hidden behind them. The teachers from my youth were gone, but the man they'd told me about was still around. I couldn't shake Him. I read Spinoza, Nietzsche, Dawkins—nothing helped. One night, I met a woman from London named Orli. Orli was also Jewish, though barely observant, with dark-green eyes and long black hair. On our third date, we went to a New York Rangers game, where for three long periods she shouted "Wanker!" at the referees, while I, having fallen in love, waited for a puck to ricochet off the goalpost, sail into the stands, and strike her, hard, at the invisible "X" that the Almighty had drawn on her forehead. (That would be so God.)



"Do you really think that if you turn on the TV on Sabbath God will make the Rangers lose?" my wife asked.

BEN KATCHOR

But Orli made it out of Madison Square Garden unharmed, and, six months later, we were married. Orli had a low-paying job assisting a wealthy socialite, and I had a low-paying job writing copy for an advertising agency. Between us, we managed to cover the essentials—food, rent for our tiny East Village studio, and cigarettes (for me). Then I quit my job in order to write something else, and struggled for months to figure out what that could be. I'd expected to earn some money freelancing in the advertising business, but God thought it would be funny to cause an industry-wide recession the week after I quit. I slept all day, and stared at blank pages all night. I felt like Beckett looked. Finally, I agreed to see a psychiatrist.

"Do you really think God is punishing you?" Dr. Hirsch asked.

His naïveté astounded me.

"I don't *think* He is. I *know* He is."

Dr. Hirsch asked me to call him Ike. I told Ike that I sometimes felt like the Biblical Egyptians, plagued by God with a darkness that never lifted. He told me that his fee was three hundred and fifty dollars.

"A week?"

"A session. But we need to see each other twice a week."

It drove me mad that I couldn't afford sanity, but my choices were simple: stay crazy, move out of Manhattan, or return to work. Fortunately, the head of the agency I'd recently left had assured me that I could come back anytime. His name was Nick. "We're family here," Nick said.

I went to see him after my first visit with Ike.

"Can I come back?" I asked.

"No," Nick said.

Orli and I moved out of Manhattan four weeks later. After the city's punishing expense, we'd decided to give suburban life in New Jersey a try. We settled on the town of Teaneck, just over the George Washington Bridge. *And Abraham arose, and went forth.*

Teaneck is really two towns: a mostly Jewish, upper-middle-class community with stately Tudor homes, well-kept lawns, and shady streets, and, to the northeast, a mostly black community—livelier but more run-down, with a couple of strip malls, a video-rental shop, and a Popeye's Chicken. The Jews don't often venture into the black area, which begins at State Street, and the blacks don't often venture into the Jewish area, which begins at Queen Anne Road. The two-block area in between is therefore a sort of suburban-American Green Zone. It has a Walgreens, a Chinese laundry, a heavy police presence, and an apartment complex called Terrace Circle.

The day Orli and I moved into our Terrace Circle one-bedroom, my sister-in-law drove us around for a tour. She and my brother had lived in Terrace Circle for many years, and had recently moved across Queen Anne Road to a multilevel, multi-bedroom Tudor of their own.

"There's the kosher butcher," my sister-in-law said. "And there's the Dunkin' Donuts. Dunkin' Donuts is kosher—but not the tuna fish, or the eggs. Not sure about the crullers. That's Rabbi Hecht's synagogue. Very Orthodox. You know Rabbi Mandelbaum? There's his synagogue. Our synagogue is up this way..."

I stared glumly out the window of

her minivan as we drove past the houses and the synagogues and the yeshivas and the houses and the synagogues and the yeshivas. The previous night, I had gone to sleep in a Lee Friedlander photograph; I had woken up in one by Roman Vishniac.

"Did I show you the kosher-pizza store?" my sister-in-law asked.

"Wow," I said, indicating my wristwatch. "Cable guy's coming."

There are thirty-nine categories of work that are prohibited on the Sabbath. Category No. 37, Kindling a Fire, also rules out the "kindling" of anything electrical, including a television. It was Friday, May 6, 1994: Game Four of the Stanley Cup conference semifinals between the Rangers and the Washington Capitals was scheduled for that Saturday afternoon. I had decided to switch on the television Friday afternoon—before Sabbath began, at sundown—and just leave it on until Sabbath ended, twenty-five hours later, on Saturday night. This wasn't, technically, "being in the spirit of Sabbath," but it wasn't technically a sin, and the Rangers were very likely nine victories away from winning the Stanley Cup for the first time in fifty-four years.

The cable guy gone, I switched on the television, turned down the volume, and draped a bath towel over the screen to hide from the neighbors the flickering blue light of our moral weakness.

"Do you really think that if you turn on the TV on Sabbath God will make the Rangers lose?" Orli asked.

Her naïveté astounded me.

"I don't *think* He will. I *know* He will."

She put her arm around me.

"They really did a number on you," she said.

We showered, dressed, lit the Sabbath candles, and walked to my brother's house for the Friday-night Sabbath meal. He showed us his house. He showed us his yard. He showed us his new sedan. He showed us his new fishing rods.

"Did you see my new TV?" he asked.

"We better get going," Orli said. I apologized for her, feigned resistance, and we hurried home together, arm in arm, through the darkening night.

The following morning, I stared out the living-room window in horror: dozens of formally dressed young married couples, at least half of the women cradling babies, were standing around on the patchy lawn at the heart of the Terrace Circle complex. (Sitting on the lawn was prohibited, because the grass could dye your clothes—Dyeing, Category No. 15. Some held that it was also a violation of Plowing, Category No. 2, and, should the grass be pulled out of the ground by the heel of your shoe, Reaping, Category No. 3.) The window was open, and I could hear the couples with babies telling the couples without babies how great it was to have babies. The couples without babies were saying, "We can't wait."

"*Im yirtzeh Hashem* by you," the couples with babies replied. If God so desires it by you.

Orli and I decided to go for a walk.

"Do I have to wear Sabbath clothes?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Orli asked.

"What are you wearing?"

"I'm wearing clothes."

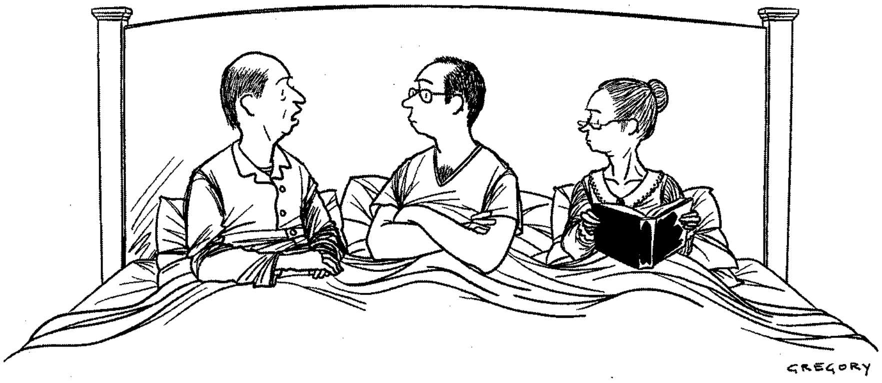
"Those are Sabbath clothes."

"A skirt is Sabbath clothes?"

"Yes," I said.

"You just don't like skirts."

"Because people wear them on Sabbath."



"Helen, is it possible that we are using our child as an intimacy barrier?"

"Because you think they make me look Jewish."

"They do make you look Jewish. They make you look like you're Jewish and it's Sabbath."

"Just tell me, Shal," she said. "I don't know these people. Can I wear this or not?"

"I don't know."

"What about these sneakers?"

"What about them?"

"Can I wear them? Will the Rangers lose if I wear sneakers on Sabbath?"

I considered the question.

"Probably."

"Fine," she said, shrugging, "then I'll wear shoes. I don't mind."

We walked across the lawn and down the Terrace Circle driveway, and headed away from the complex.

"*Gut' Shabbos*," someone called to us.

"*Gut' Shabbos*," we called back.

"*Gut' Shabbos*," called someone else.

"*Gut' Shabbos*," we called back.

"*Gut' Shabbos*," called a third someone.

"Piss off," I muttered.

Finally, we crossed State Street and found a small playground, where we sat on some swings and smoked a joint (Category No. 37, Kindling a Fire). The Sages say that one may violate the Sabbath only in order to save a Jewish life, but, as my new antidepressants had yet to kick in, I figured God would give me a pass on a couple of Sabbath-morning hits.

"It's not so bad," I said, handing the joint to Orli. "We can make it work."

She took a hit, looked down at her Sabbath shoes, and nodded.

It was past two o'clock in the afternoon when we finally returned to Terrace Circle, and we were pretty seriously high (Category No. 11, Baking). People were just finishing their Sabbath lunches and stumbling outside, the men patting their distended bellies with pride, the women doing the same with their babies.

"Which synagogue will you guys be going to?" a man named Daniel Something asked.

"The one, you know," I said. "Rabbi . . ."

"Hecht?" he offered.

"Yup," I said.

"Hecht," said Orli.

"I hate that synagogue," said Daniel's wife. "You should go to Rabbi Levine's synagogue. The people are much cooler."

"Rabbi Levine's synagogue?" her husband asked, taking offense. "What's so great about Rabbi Levine's synagogue?"

"Nothing," said Daniel's wife. The baby she was holding began to cry. "I just think they'd like it better."

"So they wouldn't like Rabbi Hecht's synagogue?" asked Daniel. "How do you know what synagogue they would like? Do you know who Rabbi Hecht studied with? Rabbi Soleveitchik!"

"So?" shouted his wife. The baby was screaming.

"So?" Daniel shouted back. "So?"

By the time we returned to our apartment, the Rangers game was half over. We closed the blinds, locked the front door, froze in place for a moment when neighbors on their way out stopped at our apartment door to listen, then lifted the towel off the TV screen, pulled on our Rangers jerseys (mine home, hers away), and sat side by side on the couch, biting our nails and trying not to shout at every slap shot. The score was tied at one goal apiece.

"Do we have to invite them over now?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The Whoevers. Daniel and his wife."

"I don't know," said Orli.

"I think we do," I said.

"We don't have to do anything."

The Rangers wasted a power-play opportunity and turned the puck over twice in their own zone.

"I think we have to invite them over," I said.

Thirty poorly played minutes later, the final buzzer sounded and the Rangers had lost, 4–2. I cursed the refs, I cursed the Capitals, and I cursed myself for leaving the television on in the first place. I looked up and I scowled at the heavens.

The Rangers won Game Five, eliminating the Capitals and moving on to face the New Jersey Devils in the best-of-seven conference finals. By the end of the week, the Rangers led the series 2–1, and I was beginning to think that God might have got a touch of Ranger fever Himself. Then I watched Game Four (a Saturday), which the Devils won easily, 3–1. Monday night's game was even worse: Devils, 4–1. I sat back on my couch and stared at the television in disbelief as the Rangers skated, heads lowered, off the ice.

"We shouldn't have watched those games," I said.

"What games?" Orli asked.

"The ones on Sabbath."

Orli sat down beside me and patted my thigh.

"Hey," she said, her voice soft. "Come on."

Wednesday night, God let the Rangers win Game Six, in order to set up a Game Seven showdown on a Friday night. Such a drama queen.

Friday afternoon I saw Ike. I wanted to talk about God. He wanted to talk about my family. An advertising agency in midtown had offered me a long-term freelance assignment, and though I loathed myself for taking it, I loved getting out of Teaneck every day, I loved being able to pay Ike, and Orli loved our new Chrysler LeBaron convertible in forest green. Ike delicately suggested that we think about moving.

"You've got to get out of there," he said. "You need to get away from your past."

"I need a full-time job."

Ike sighed. "I'm not telling you anything you don't know."

"Then how do you explain these rates?" I asked.

Three phone messages were waiting for me when I got home: my sister-in-law had phoned, inviting us for Sabbath dinner that evening; David Whateverstein had left a message inviting us over to their apartment for Sabbath lunch; and my mother had phoned, wishing me a "*gutten Shabbos*" and asking me to wish my brother the same when I saw him at synagogue.

I switched on the TV, turned down the volume, draped the towel over the screen, and closed the window blinds.

Game Seven, God, I thought. *Don't screw around.*

We raced through dinner at my brother's house, and made it home just in time for the start of the second period. Seven seconds before the final buzzer, New Jersey scored and sent the game into overtime. At 4:24 of the second overtime, New York's left winger Stephane Matteau rattled the puck in off the stick of a Devils defenseman.

"The Rangers," Marv Albert said, "are going to the Stanley Cup finals."

Orli and I screamed into our couch pillows, rolled on the floor, and shouted into balled-up bath towels. I cheered for the Rangers' aggressive offense. I cheered for their shrewd post-season trades. Most of all, I cheered for a God who maybe, just maybe, wasn't the prick they told me He was.

The deal I made with Him for the finals, against the Vancouver Canucks, was this: regardless of the outcome of Games One and Two, I would not watch Game Three (a Saturday). In a seven-game series, it could never be a decisive game, but at least I was offering Him something.

And by Game Four (a Tuesday) the Rangers were up, 2–1. After seeing Ike that afternoon, I had some time before the next bus to Teaneck, and decided to walk to the Port Authority. I passed Madison Square Garden, home ice for the Rangers, where I noticed a large crowd gathered on the arena's front steps.

"What's going on?" I asked a nearby hot-dog vender.

"Big game tonight," he said. "Hockey."

"Game's in Canada," I said, peering at the crowd across the street.

An excited man in a Rangers jersey pushed in beside me; in his hand was a placard that read "DESTINY."

"One with everything," he said to the vender.

"Game's in Canada," I said to the Rangers fan.

"Away game," he said. "For five bucks, you can watch it on the JumboTron. Go Rangers!" the man called, rushing off to the Garden. "Fifty-four years!"

"Go Rangers!" I called back.

I was too late to get tickets to that night's game, but Game Six (a Saturday) was also an away game. Friday morning, I went to Madison Square Garden, where I paid ten dollars for two tickets. Why should God care whether I watched it on the seventeen-inch screen in my living room or on the JumboTron hanging over center ice at the Garden? I simply had to make sure that I committed no more sins getting to the game than I would have at home.

Teaneck felt like defeat. These tickets felt like rebellion, like life, and Orli cheered when I got back home and showed them to her.

I tried to calm her down.

"Listen," I said, "we're going to have to walk there."

Funds were tight, even with the money from my freelance work coming in. We could have left right then, and taken the car, but even if we'd made it to the city before sundown we could never have afforded a night in a Manhattan hotel, and we had no friends to stay with. The only people I knew in Manhattan were my co-workers from my old job, whom Nick had once asked me to address in order to explain my absence from after-work gatherings on Friday nights.

"I'm married," I'd told them. "And we kind of observe Sabbath."

They didn't know what to say. "You can't go to bars on Sabbath?"

"No."

"Can you go to a concert?"

"No."

"What can you do?"

"Nothing."

"Why do you observe it?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Rangers!" Orli cheered again, jumping up and down in place.

"It's fourteen miles."

"RANGERS!"

At one o'clock the next afternoon, in order to avoid raising suspicions among our neighbors, Orli and I set out for New York in our Sabbath finest—me in dress pants and a white button-down shirt, Orli in a blue dress and fancy shoes. In the backpack slung over my shoulder, I had our tickets, two Rangers hats, two Rangers jerseys (mine home, hers away), and some food for along the way. *And the children of Israel went up, harnessed, out of the land of Egypt.*

It was a sweltering June day. I was sweating heavily before we even reached the Teaneck town line. Mosquitoes sent by God surrounded my head; gnats attempted infiltration through my nose, as He had commanded them. We walked, single file, along Route 4, a six-lane interstate connecting New Jersey to New York City. Cars, trucks, and buses brushed past us at seventy miles an hour.

After an hour, we reached the George Washington Bridge. Here Route 4 merged with I-95, and six lanes of traffic became eight, then ten, then twelve—a concrete maze of on-ramps, off-ramps, and cloverleafs. We climbed over a guardrail, bolted across two Trucks Only lanes, climbed another guardrail, crossed a bus lane, and made for a small concrete island where we waited for a break in traffic to allow us to cross the last three lanes to safety.

"They better win," I called out to Orli.

"What?"

"I SAID, 'THEY BETTER WIN.'"

Two tractor-trailers passed by, then a van and a couple of cars.

"Run!" I shouted, and we took off.

By the time we crossed the George Washington Bridge and followed the ramp to the West Side Highway, it was past three o'clock, and the sun was still getting stronger. You could have fried an egg on my head. (Cooking, a subcategory of Baking, Category No. 11. Some rabbis say that if my head had been hot before Sabbath began, and the egg had been previously fried, you would be permitted to put the egg on my head in order to heat it up; others disagree.)

We had planned to follow the highway straight down to Thirty-third Street, but the shoulder was too treacherous. We climbed back up the ramp, crossed Riverside Drive, walked down 168th Street, turned right on Broadway, and headed downtown. Washington Heights became Spanish Harlem, Spanish Harlem became regular Harlem, and regular Harlem became the Upper West Side. We passed the San Juan Car Service, the Puerto Rico Car Service, and Transportes Satolino. Los Muchachos Grocery and El Puerto Fishmarket gave way to Ben's Kosher Deli, Benny's Kosher Pizza, and Benjy's Kosher Falafel, and we fought the desire to hail every cab that drove by. Old blisters popped. New blisters formed. God peered down, waiting, waiting.

"They better fucking win," I grumbled.

"They better fucking win," Orli agreed.

Exhaustion hit us hard at Fifty-ninth Street. We barely spoke. Each block felt like a mile. But as we reached Forty-second Street we saw large groups of screaming hockey fans streaming down Broadway in their Rangers colors, clapping their hands and blowing their air horns. Taxicabs honked in time to the "Let's Go, Rangers" song. We pulled on our caps and jerseys and ran. We didn't stop until we were inside the Garden and settled in our seats, halfway up the arena, just to the left of center ice. Almost immediately, the JumboTron lit up. Some two thousand miles away, the Rangers took the ice, and we stood and cheered with all our might. Being in this enormous arena, surrounded by thousands of people shouting praise for people who weren't there, was the closest I'd felt to belonging in a very long time; it felt like synagogue—another place people cheered for someone who wasn't there—but with hockey.

Fifty-four years, I thought to God as I clapped and cheered and held my fists in the air. *Do not screw around.*

It wasn't even close. The Vancouver goalie was nearly perfect, allowing only one Rangers goal the entire game. The Canucks scored four.

"There's always Game Seven," Orli said.

But that wasn't the point, was it? I hadn't watched Game Three. I hadn't got in a cab, or jumped on a bus. The point was that WE HAD A DEAL. The point was that I was living in a shtetl in New Jersey. I was giving it a shot, I was giving the whole damn thing another shot, and how many shots was He giving me? *Tell me, God,* I thought as I sat there in Madison Square Garden, *what line did I cross, what nonsensical, inscrutable law did I break that warranted this?* So I had carried a backpack (Carrying, No. 39). Was He serious? No way He was busting me on fucking *carrying.* I had walked a long way, that was true—you're forbidden to walk more than half a mile on Sabbath—but, Jesus Christ, I'm not the one who put Madison Square Garden on Thirty-third Street, am I?

"I'm not watching Game Seven," I said.

Orli sighed.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

I stared at the floor, unable to bring myself to face her, and I wondered how much longer she would be speaking to me at all. Was this why God had let her survive that first Rangers game of ours, so many months ago? So I could drive her away myself? If the Rangers had won tonight, at least my insanity would have been validated. Now, as the Garden emptied, I had nothing.

We rode down the escalators in silence. What had I been thinking, playing the odds with this guy? In God's casino, the house always wins—ask Job, ask Sarah—and there I was, sitting at the Lord's poker table, trying to count cards.

"What now?" Orli asked once we'd made it outside.

All around us, people in non-Sabbath clothing jumped up and down on their non-blistered feet, talking excitedly about the game—"What a series!"—and making predictions for Game Seven.

Across the street, on the far corner of Thirty-third, I spotted the hot-dog vender I had spoken with a few days before. I grabbed Orli by the hand and ran.

"Where are we going?" she shouted.

We ran across the sidewalk, dodging hockey fans, and weaved our way through the taxicabs idling on Broadway.

"One with everything," I said to the vender. "Extra *treyf.*"

Orli gasped.

The vender handed me the hot dog, and I shovelled it straight into my mouth, forcing as much of it in as I could.

Orli screamed with glee.

"He hungry guy," the vender said to her.

My cheeks stretched. My jaw ached. Mustard ran down my chin. I looked up at the sky, smiled at God as best I could, and gave Him the finger.

"Tashtes pfiggy," I managed to say.

Orli was clapping when I held the rest of the hot dog out to her; she raised her arms overhead in victory, dived forward, and took a vicious chomp off the end.

"Mmm," she said. "Non-kosher . . ."

We laughed and hugged and tried to swallow without choking.

"Buck-fifty," said the vender.

I reached into my pocket and handed him a five.

"You carried *money*?" Orli cried. (In addition to the thirty-nine categories of work, the Sages also prohibited the touching or moving of anything—like money—that might lead to the thirty-nine categories of work.) "That's why they lost!"

"It was for an emergency!" I pleaded, and we made our way toward Sixth Avenue to find a cab heading uptown.

I took another bite of my hot dog, grimaced, and threw it in the trash.

"Not as good as I thought it would be," I said.

Orli pointed at the trash can.

"Wasting food," she said quietly. "There goes Game Seven."

Her naïveté simply astounded me.

"He'll make them win," I said. "Just to stick it to me."

Three days later, on Tuesday, June 14th, the Rangers won Game Seven of the 1994 Stanley Cup championship by a final score of 3–2. I didn't watch the game. O.K., fine, I watched the last period.

It figures, I thought, as Messier held the Stanley Cup over his head and circled the ice. So predictable.

The following Saturday, Orli and I drove on the Sabbath for the very first time. We waited until after lunch, and when the Terrace Circle lawn finally cleared we tiptoed downstairs, crept into our shiny new forest-green Chrysler LeBaron, and quietly drove out of the Terrace Circle parking lot. We hit Queen Anne Road, floored it, and drove to the Riverside Square Mall, in Hackensack, where we browsed for a while, talked about God, but couldn't bring ourselves to use money to make any purchases. The Sabbath after that, we crept out again, this time to the Bergen Mall, where we browsed for a while, talked about God, bought some books and CDs, but left the packages in the car when we got home so that no one would see us carrying them in.

The advertising agency for which I had been freelancing had promised me a full-time job, and soon it delivered; Orli and I found an apartment on West Fifty-sixth Street, a one-bedroom non-Tudor, overlooking nothing, with no lawn out front. It was perfect.

And the Sabbath after that we walked to the Terrace Circle parking lot, climbed into the LeBaron, put the top down, and cranked up the music. We drove to Staples, where we bought some packing supplies, and then to Sixth Avenue Electronics, where we bought a twenty-one-inch color TV for the new apartment. It was just after one o'clock in the afternoon when we returned, and everyone was out on the lawn, walking off the Sabbath meal. We strode in slow motion across the grass—Orli with her arms full of Staples shopping bags, me struggling with a twenty-one-inch color TV—past the couples with babies and the couples without babies holding the babies of the couples with babies, and they all stared and gasped and shook their heads. Mrs. Whateverberg sat scowling on the bench beside the door to our building. I winked as we walked by.

"Twenty-one inches," I whispered. "Cable-ready. *Im yirtzeh Hashem* by you." ♦

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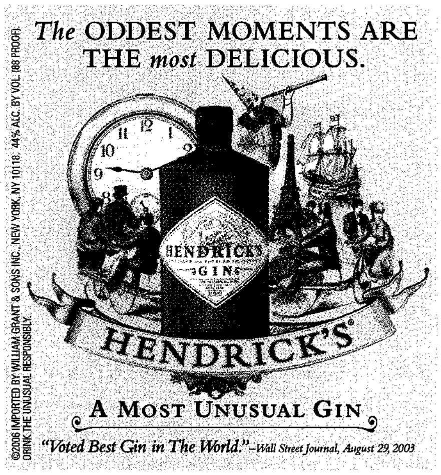

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

EXPECTATIONS

Can the students who became a symbol of failed reform be rescued?

BY KATHERINE BOO

Like most juniors at Manual High School, in the impoverished northeast quarter of Denver, Colorado, Norberto Felix-Cruz was Mexican, multiply pierced, and laden with chains. Although he was quiet by nature, he clanked when he walked. On his way to school from the small house he shared with many relatives, he sometimes passed a park with brown grass and a curious sign: "'Tis not birth nor wealth nor state, but get up and get which makes any man great." Norberto wasn't expecting greatness, however, and he often arrived late. His departures were just as unhurried. Manual's peacock-blue hallways were peaceful, owing to the presence of armed police officers, and he found them a good place to linger.

As classes let out one afternoon last spring, he was crouched in front of a metal bookcase in Manual's basement, smoothing and stowing the fat triangle of a folded American flag. This was his duty as battalion commander of the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, one of the few elective courses available at Manual, and the only one with negative social status. When the previous commander was discharged—she was pregnant and had started to show—the post had not been hotly contested. Still, Norberto was grateful to J.R.O.T.C. for his appointment, because it had prompted his mother to brag about him for the first time since he shamed his family by picking up a drug charge, freshman year. He was grateful, too, he said, because "J.R.O.T.C. really stands for free food—Country Buffet after Color Guard, all you can eat, and shrimps and wings and chimichangas." Thanks to these subsidized meals, he had progressed since freshman year from scrawny to nearly imposing, an impression that he enhanced with black work boots, a pencil-line goatee, glittery earrings, and a tendency to walk with his chin down and eyes half-lidded. It was a stride of wary resolve, Norberto hoped, and he adopted it as he made his way from the J.R.O.T.C. office, past the cops, and out to the aluminum bleachers by the track, where some of his classmates were taking the sun.

"You got the brains of a stripper," a sophomore boy was saying to a plump, ponytailed girl (another beneficiary of J.R.O.T.C. food) who was dating an older guy whom nobody liked. Seeing Norberto, the boy changed the subject: "Hey, Norberto, you know how people get the teardrop tattoo on their cheek the first time they kill someone? My friend—I'm serious—he put the *name* of the guy on his face!"

Norberto worked construction most afternoons, with his father, who had brought his family up from Durango ten years earlier. They had a drywall job to finish by the evening. Now, though, Norberto sat and stretched his legs. The bleachers offered a view of the Rockies, forty miles west, and, against them, the towers and cranes of downtown Denver. But his focus soon drifted to the plank on which he sat, which had been freshly tagged with gang graffiti. Studying the elaborate red scrawl, he said to his friends, "The person who did this tag didn't know how to spell the name Chici." The Chici 30s, a local gang, were in ascendance at Manual now that members of their rival gang, the Oldies, had dropped out. "See," he said, "they think the word 'Chici' begins with a 'Q.' "

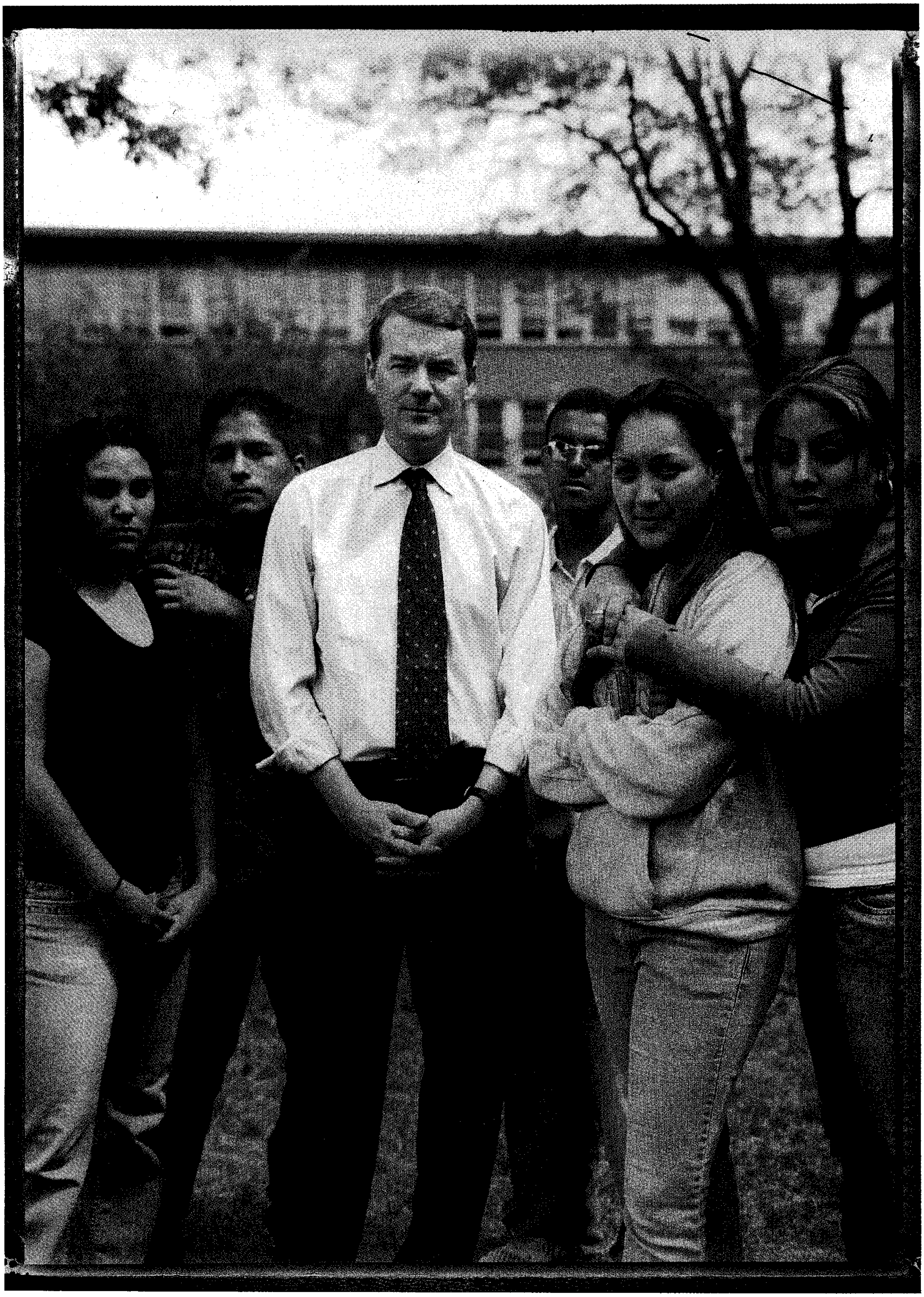
"So what's the right way to spell it?" someone asked. It was quiet then, until the girl with the ponytail protested, "Norberto, stop looking to me like that, like you're some teacher!"

"Well, I don't care to know," another boy said. "I don't like those dudes, remember?"

"No wonder the whole city thinks we're stupid," Norberto said, addressing a recent turn of events that some on the bleachers still refused to accept. "Like, that's our education in a nutshell—we can't even spell our own gangs right."

Last year, Manual High was one of the worst schools in Colorado. Nine out of ten students failed the state writing test; ninety-seven of a hundred failed the math test; one in five freshmen graduated. This wretched showing belied the fact that, for a decade, Manual High had been the object of aggressive and thoughtful reforms. The most recent was a million-dollar intervention by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, begun in 2001, which turned each of Manual's three floors into an intimate mini-school, with its own principal. In these environments, some students had a sense, for the first time, that their teachers knew and cared for them. But in many classrooms the mutual affection came at the expense of academic rigor. Discipline was weak, gang ties intensified, and in five years a student body of eleven hundred shrank by nearly half. The academic performance of the vestigial students—"the dregs," as one counsellor put it—barely changed.

Manual's imperviousness to reform was an extreme example of a national commonplace: after a quarter century of concerted attempts to improve urban school districts, the results for poor children, beyond some gains at the elementary level, remain slight. Predictably, the troubles at Manual registered only faintly in Denver's wealthier precincts, where private schooling is the norm and community advocacy revolves around environmental issues like carbon emissions and the tree canopy. The school, which was situated at the terminus of the city's light-rail line, was considered, if at all, with nostalgia. Founded more than a century ago and named for the kind of labor it prepared students to do—bricklaying, printing—it had produced some of the city's leading black politicians. In



Denver schools superintendent Michael Bennet with students from Manual High. Photographs by Robin Bowman.

recent years, though, the neighborhoods from which Manual derived its students had gone from black to brown, as Mexicans arrived to take service jobs in the prospering city center. Whites would dominate the neighborhood next, students predicted; there was already a fair-trade coffee shop. But for now the commercial offerings on the boulevards included cheap vodka, kidney dialysis, and a juvenile jail. Outsiders didn't often swing by. Thus, as 2006 began, the teen-agers were stunned to discover that they had become symbols of academic failure citywide.

The cause of this unflattering attention was a new superintendent named Michael Bennet, one of a loose cadre of former business, military, and government leaders, all education novices, who have taken control of some of the largest, most troubled school systems in the country. Joel Klein, New York City's schools chancellor (and a former Assistant Attorney General of the United States), may be the best known of the group; Bennet is, at forty-two, one of the youngest. A former editor-in-chief of the *Yale Law Journal* who had become bored by the legal profession, he spent his thirties making a small fortune as a corporate-turnaround artist. Then his thoughts shifted to public service. In 2003, when a friend, John Hickenlooper, was elected mayor of Denver, Bennet became his chief of staff. Two years later, the superintendency came open for the fifth time in a decade, and Hickenlooper suggested that Bennet apply.

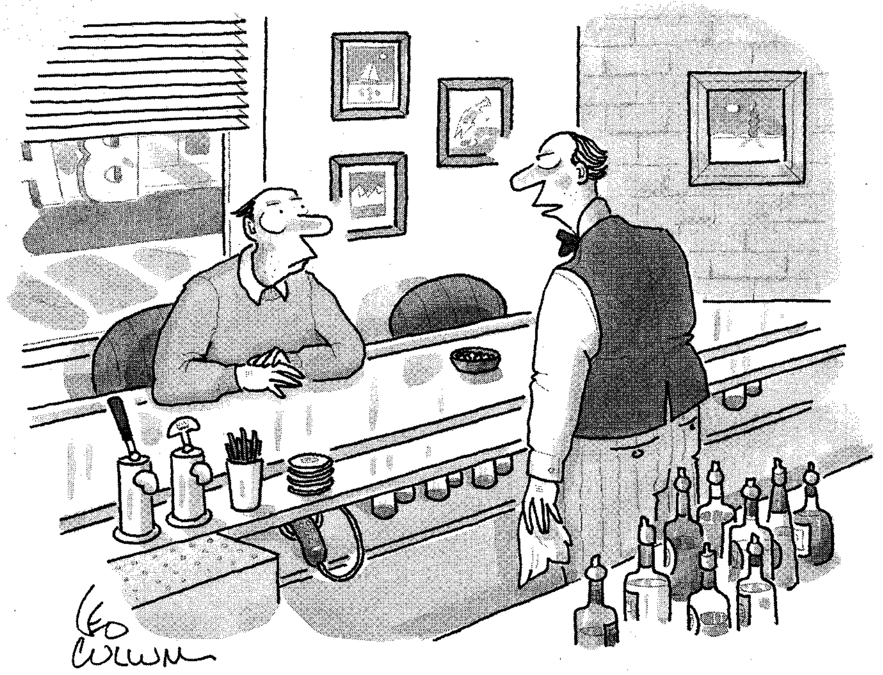
To Bennet, who aspired to public office, running an urban school district seemed more likely to end a political career than to launch it. Most of the children in the district were poor, and eighty per cent were minorities, including a huge number of Latino immigrants. Nationally, Latinas are twice as likely to become mothers in their teens, and Latinos of both sexes are two times as likely to drop out. Moreover, while student achievement is closely correlated with parental involvement, many Denver parents hadn't attended high school in their native countries, and some were illegal residents in their new one. The illegals tended to steer clear of public institutions, including their children's schools.

Still, Bennet was struck by the fact that a few schools across the country had raised the test scores of their poor and minority student bodies—successes that seemed counter to the idea that underlying social conditions had to be redressed before disadvantaged minority students could do well. As Bennet studied those exceptional schools—a Knowledge Is Power Program charter school in the Bronx, public schools in Norfolk and Aldine, Texas—he began to think about how some of their strategies might be expanded to reform a whole district. Ambitions began to coalesce, and the school board chose him over two strong minority candidates.

In July, 2005, when Bennet took control of the district's hundred and fifty schools, he still knew little about life inside public-school classrooms. He knew less about children like Norberto. Nevertheless, he moved quickly to impose on his seventy-three thousand charges the toughest graduation requirements in the state, aiming to prepare the majority for college.

Some of Bennet's forty-four hundred teachers and principals looked askance at this abrupt elevation of standards, cautioning that many students would fall short, and then drop out. Bennet considered this view to be cynical, and saw in the underpopulated, seemingly irremediable Manual High an opportunity to show how intolerant of low expectations he planned to be. The school was costly to run half-empty, and, when he'd paid a visit on the first day of the school year, he'd found the students and teachers already exhausted. The principals were feuding, and their attention to children was so erratic that some of them had taken and passed freshman English only to be forced to repeat the course as sophomores. "Nobody in America should have to go to a school like that," he told his wife that night. A few months later, when he had in hand a commissioned study of the school's dim prospects, he told his school board, "We shouldn't let any more students enroll there." Board members agreed, and went further: the current students shouldn't stay and languish, either. In February, as a warning to the dozens of other schools in the district that were failing to properly educate poor and minority children—and with little warning to students and neighborhood residents—the board moved, with Bennet's approval, to shut down Manual at the end of the semester. It was an admission, Bennet said, of a school district's absolute failure.

Bennet has an open, lightly freckled face, and an air of capable good spirits—qualities that only partly mask the intensity and severity of his judgments. (Even asleep, his wife had noticed, he issued orders, as if crisply directing his dreams.)



"I love our little chats, Jack, but you've got to start drinking again."

His arguments occasionally got ahead of themselves, with interpretations that outran the facts, but this was not, in the main, a careless tendency. It was the practice of an overachiever. He liked to announce improbable goals, then defy expectations of failure. Among the challenges that now intrigued him were the six hundred students of Manual High.

Other ambitious superintendents admit privately that radical reform has collateral costs, and that students like Norberto bear them. Compared with pliable second graders, teen-agers are a poor investment, and districts routinely write off the worst performers. (In fact, in the age of the all-determining standardized test, nudging indifferent high-school students to drop out before exam day is one way for administrators to boost their test scores.) At first, Bennet seemed to advocate a write-off as well: offering to give Manual students free transportation to a nearby high school that was almost as bad. When school-board members objected, though, he began to give the matter more thought.

The teen-agers' educational deficiencies would not be easily corrected; to judge by state assessments through the years, many hadn't had a decent year of schooling in their lives. But he decided that, with aggressive help, some futures might still be improved. Under Bennet's new plan, the Manual children would choose from an array of better high schools across the city, and be offered mentors, summer remedial courses, and academic counselling to ease the transition. Computer programs would track their performance—a failed test here, a week of unexplained absence there—and identify those who might need extra help.

This approach was shrewd politics, some of Bennet's peers in the city's élite observed. Otherwise, in some future campaign ad, he'd be the rich guy who stole the futures of six hundred poor children. A futile gesture, said the Manual teachers, who predicted many dropouts and fleeting public concern. The term "moral obligation" was also suggested as an explanation of Bennet's interest, mostly by the superintendent himself. Whatever the motivation, for the rest of 2006 the wholly inexperienced Bennet found himself trying to prove that teen-agers like Norberto were not lost causes of educational reform. Among his doubters were the children themselves.

When Norberto was upset, he fell silent. It was a habit he despised in himself, and one that his friend and classmate Julissa Torrez did not share. When she was in distress, words flew from her like sparks, and this made the weeks following the Manual decision less depressing to the student body than they might have been. A hundred-pound former cheerleader, Julissa had been changing—flattening her ringlets under knit caps and bandannas. She no longer wore saucy outfits, and no longer smiled on command. Instead, she wrote clipped, angry poems. Before the Manual decision, these works had typically addressed the males she was falling for ("I'm one confused Virgo, and not ashamed to say it, because I always choose the boys with downfalls") and the world in which she and Norberto were growing up:

Go home be ashamed
foodstamps to medicaid
poor slang hustlas
we are all each other customers
boys go from apple jacks to weed sacks
fast.

In February, though, she addressed her poems to Superintendent Bennet. One couplet conveyed neatly the sentiments of Norberto and the rest of the student body, some of whom were so attached to Manual that, upon enrolling, they'd carved its initials into their skin:

You might as well put us in jail
because your plan sets us all up to fail.

When Bennet arrived at Manual for a community meeting one winter evening, Julissa summoned the old cheerleader bravado, stood, and read one such poem "right to his face." When she finished, a hundred and thirty people cheered, and the next day her words were in the *Rocky Mountain News*. It was the beginning of a season—brief, it turned out—when strangers seemed to hang on what Manual students had to say.

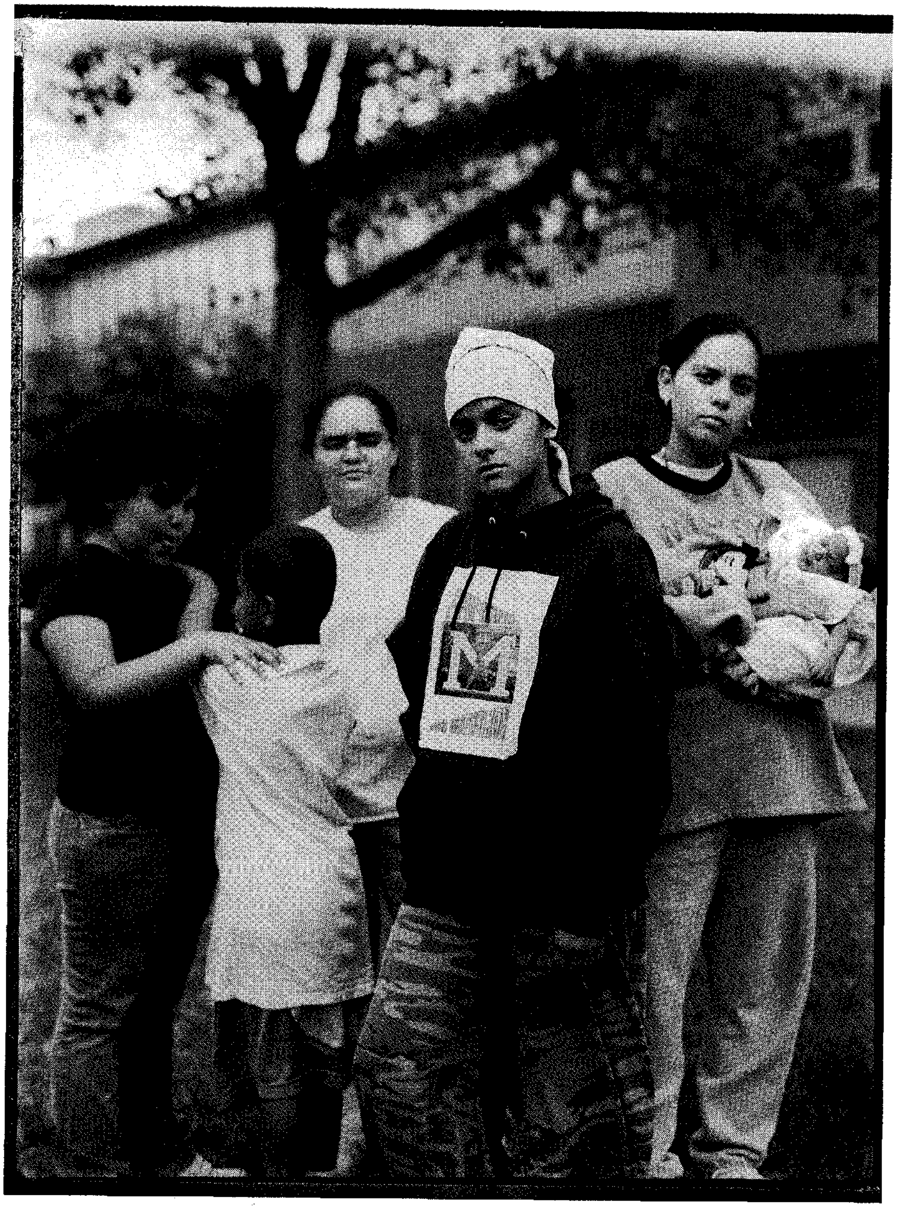
The high point, Julissa and Norberto later agreed, was February 17th—the day that the students marched down icy streets to the superintendent's office, a crew of cameramen beside them, demanding that Manual stay open. Julissa wept, and punched the air. "We're human beings, not animals to be tested on!" she screamed. "I am successful, whatever you say!" Norberto, coatless and freezing, stood at the periphery, holding a sign that someone had put in his hands. Education activists from a nonprofit organization downtown were energetically backing the rebellion, providing reporters with tips and students with stickers that said "Not My Choice." Most of the Manual faculty supported the protest, too, in part because they were angry at Bennet, who had publicly declared their work a failure, and in part because they feared for the children. As a Manual principal named Tim Harp put it, "You put these kids in a regular school—well, I hate to say it, but they're going to get punked. And they can see it coming."

Before long, some of the city's black leaders had joined the movement. Criticizing school officials who think "they know more about what we need for our children than we do," the clergyman who heads the Greater Metro Denver Ministerial Alliance rallied citizens to "stand up like Rosa Parks sat down," and the pastor of New Hope Baptist Church called Bennet and his allies "latter-day representatives of the Ku Klux Klan." The education of white children would not have been so summarily disrupted, the ministers argued. Community rallies ended with renditions of "We Shall Overcome," the words to which Norberto and Julissa didn't know, and civil-rights lawyers began to hang around. However, Bennet and the school board didn't budge, and by the end of April, with other outrages presumably beckoning, the television reporters, ministers, and lawyers moved on.

The students were as perplexed about why they'd lost the community's attention as they'd been about having it in the first place, but there wasn't much use in complaining. Julissa had two sisters at Manual, one, Zerina, who was to be valedictorian, and one a thoughtful ninth grader named Ashley, whose advice to schoolmates was succinct: "We have to get over losing this thing, because we're going to be losing things all our lives."

Norberto agreed with this assessment, and returned to his academic routine. As a student, he was ranked in the middle of his junior class. Many of the adults at Manual, however, assumed that his grades were lower—a poor opinion for which he blamed himself. When he started at Manual as a freshman, he'd been preoccupied with working as a drug runner for the Southside Sureños, a gang that he had joined three years earlier, at the age of eleven. Barely into his first semester, he left school to serve a sentence in the nearby juvenile jail; the police had found sixteen hundred dollars' worth of cocaine in his car. "Keep it true to the blue" was the Southside position on snitching, and he had done so. But the associates whom he had protected did not visit him when he was imprisoned, and when he got out he had refused to rejoin them. This meant that back at Manual, after months of incarceration, he had neither money nor friends. And while he excelled at the math required for dealing cocaine—"how you divide and price the ounce, given your profit-over-cost calculations"—he was behind in all his other subjects. "And you know the most depressing thing?" he said. "I didn't sell drugs for survival, like some of my relatives had to, back in the day. I just sold drugs for PlayStation."

There is a Mexican saying about making mistakes young, *El que más temprano se moja, más tiempo tiene para secarse:* The earlier one gets wet, the more time to dry. Norberto thought that making mistakes young just gave a boy more years to live with the consequences. His eyes betrayed this dark self-assessment, in those instances when he lifted his head. One day, Julissa pulled up a chair.



Julissa Torrez, front, with her siblings Analissia, Isaiah, Ashley, and Zerina.

He had registered her presence already. Julissa and her sisters had a quality that he wanted to emulate. Though they walked daily into the same street foolishness he did, they had a way of backing off that made the confrontation, not the confronted, look small. His male classmates would have laughed to learn that he studied the street sense of underweight females, but he took life instruction where he found it. "In jail, I wondered what a friend is, and what it means to trust," he said one day, quietly, watching Julissa and one of her sisters across the table at lunch. "But maybe it's just, when you tell the story of yourself, you don't have to leave things out."

Julissa's own story involved a disabled mother, an absent father, overcrowded public housing, and transient motels. But she believed that self-pity was morally lame. "So a really bad life is, like, when your dad teaches you to cook up the crack before he teaches you to read," she told Norberto. "Otherwise, have an issue, grab a tissue, suck it up." She categorized her classmates as "Wants to go up" or "Doesn't care," and pushed Norberto to be one of the former. Some weeks, his parents asked him to skip school to do drywall, in order to meet a car payment or the six-hundred-dollar monthly rent. Other times, he said, "I missed school because I'd missed school, and didn't see how I would catch up." When Julissa didn't spot him in homeroom, though, she'd call: You make this place less boring—get up and come. Her sisters would work on him, too, until by the start of junior year Norberto was the one making morning calls to ambivalent scholars. "Not like I rose up high out of the ashes," he said. "Just a little more further from the ground."

Now, though, all of Denver seemed to know that the Manual classes that Norberto had struggled to pass were laughably easy, and he felt a little foolish. "I think Bennet makes our school look bad to make himself look good," he said. "Though when he says we should go to college, maybe that really is for our betterness. But what if I'm not smart enough anymore, to get that far?" There was something a teacher said in the days of protest: The world needed followers, too.

Julissa didn't have the same academic anxieties. A student-government leader who was second in her class and whose mother made sure that she stayed there, she was confident even in Honors World Literature, which she called "my college-hard course." Although the books that the teacher assigned were set in crazy places, she made connections with ease, and the lesson of the failed Manual protest seemed similar to something that she'd recently written in an essay on "Things Fall Apart," by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe: "Getting beat down help in the future because it breaks you to do whats right instead of fallowing the crowd."

The average high-school student today is weaker academically than the average high-school student of 1950. This phenomenon is often ascribed to declining standards and the degradation of culture, but democratization has been a factor, too. We now expect public high schools to offer academics—the foundation of college work—to more, and more kinds of, children. In the past twenty years, the number of high-school students who say that they expect to finish college has doubled, to more than seventy-five per cent, with the largest gains shown by the urban poor. On the other hand, the increase in the number of students who actually finish college is less than ten per cent.

When George W. Bush promoted his No Child Left Behind plan in the 2000 Presidential campaign, he said that he wanted to realize more of those aspirations, by subverting "the soft bigotry of low expectations." The formulation had a pleasing moral simplicity, and, in the years since, the repudiation of low academic standards for low-income and minority children has become dogma for both the left and the right. However, the average tenure of a superintendent in a large, high-poverty district is twenty-eight months, a statistic that suggests the practical and political difficulty of actually raising standards and then helping children to meet them.

Last May, in Michael Bennet's eleventh month on the job, he grasped more of its contradictions: for instance, that one way to avoid charges of racism was to continue to neglect bad schools for minority children. But he had been conditioned to see salutary effects in a great, public-spirited challenge. In his childhood home and at his high school—St. Albans, a private boys' school in Washington, D.C.—ideas about privilege and obligation were typically linked. His grandfather had been an economic adviser in Franklin Roosevelt's Administration. His father ran the U.S. Agency for International Development under Jimmy Carter before assuming the presidency of National Public Radio and, later, of Wesleyan University. Such a lineage exposed a boy to certain possibilities, and Michael had done well by them. Now, applying himself to children who had self-perpetuating birthrights of their own, he was undaunted by the fact that more experienced superintendents had failed at reforms less ambitious than his. "Well, one of these days someone's going to pull it off," Bennet said to me last spring. "Besides, I really don't see how you can hold both propositions to be true: that these urban public schools aren't fixable and that the America of a decade or two from now is going to be a place where any of us would want to live."

Norberto Felix-Cruz, at left, says, "I'm letting my spark up, trying to focus."

One Sunday morning shortly after the Manual protest movement sputtered, he took this relative optimism to a Presbyterian church in a neighborhood called Park Hill, where the houses are large and gabled and the tree canopy—oaks, buckeyes—stands at a healthy fifteen per cent. Thirty-five years earlier, Park Hill's white residents had moved to keep minority children out of the community's public schools, leading to the first Supreme Court case to recognize the right of Latinos to a desegregated education. The 1973 case, Keyes v. School District No. 1, had helped change the character of Park Hill as well as civil-rights law, and the neighborhood was now one of the most progressive and civic-minded in Denver. The Denver public schools, though, were like most urban school districts across the country: as segregated as they were in the nineteen-sixties.

Standing before a packed room of congregants and citizens, Bennet looked slouchy and boyish, the shirttails of his oxford escaping his trousers as he bounced on his feet. "Think about it," he said. "What other public institution would we let sink to this level? If the Mayor says, 'I'm going to pave one hundred and fifty alleys,' then comes back the next year and says, 'Well, I spent all the money and only got to two, I'll get to it next year,' we'd go crazy. But when we spend three quarters of a million dollars in a school ostensibly teaching a subject, and only two kids in that school learn anything, we think that's normal. And I think that's because we've allowed ourselves to confuse the system's lack of quality with the kind of kids who are in our district."

In his prep-school days, Bennet had been a fair actor, in roles ranging from wood sprite to God. He has a low, gravelly voice that carries without volume and gives a deadpan, cheerful air to his admonitions. His listeners, having been reproved for their indifference to the disadvantaged, generally come to feel that they've been puzzling out a rescue plan with him—unlike other shirkers in the room. As Bennet turned to the intricacies of his reform agenda, people began to nod approvingly.

"Class size matters, and the kind of breakfast a kid gets matters, too. But the studies make clear that good schools are, first and last, about the quality of the teaching," he said. No Child Left Behind does virtually nothing to inspire talented people to join the profession, and Bennet didn't have the funds to raise salaries significantly, owing to rising pension costs and declining enrollment in the district. Still, he wanted Denver to be known as a place where the craft of teaching was taken seriously and a sense of philanthropic mission embraced. His chief academic adviser and pedagogy coach, Jaime Aquino, had been a seminarian, counselling lepers in the Dominican Republic, after which he taught and ran bilingual programs in the New York City schools. Already, Denver voters had approved a twenty-five-million-dollar tax increase that allowed Bennet and Aquino to expand a model program that paid teachers for improving achievement and taking assignments in high-poverty schools. (The most experienced and credentialled teachers have always clustered where they add the least value: in public schools with affluent student bodies.) Now the two men would train their teachers and principals in strategies that were showing measurable results in impoverished settings elsewhere in the country: for instance, asking middle-school students who were below grade level in reading or math to forfeit electives for a double dose of that subject. They would reduce the time that teachers spent on matters unrelated to student achievement, and provide more and better data about how individual students were progressing throughout the year. (Only after the school year is over do state tests tell a teacher which students have failed to learn.) Though urban schools are typically better at measuring what eight-year-olds do than what teachers and administrators do, Bennet promised accountability on both sides.

"I want us to be a leader in this country at a time when, more than anything else, the American public needs to see an urban school district succeed," Bennet said in conclusion. "So what I'm asking you for now is to refuse pessimism about our kids, to hold me accountable, to keep this conversation about student achievement going, to sign up—got to slip a plug in here—to be a mentor for one of the Manual students." He stopped, shrugged, and opened his palms. It took him half an hour to detach himself from listeners who wanted to enlist in his cause.

We got into Bennet's six-year-old Saab, then sped past City Park, with its zoo, formal gardens, and lakes, and entered less congenial territory. He wanted to show me around Manual High. I had known Bennet slightly fifteen years earlier, through his brother, James, a friend who is now the editor of *The Atlantic.* Michael was then clerking for a federal judge, and positioning himself for a prime appointment in the U.S. Department of Justice as the Clinton Administration began. He struck me at the time as someone to whom old-fashioned words like "clubbable" and "well met" would apply, but he wasn't particularly happy. He was only a few years out of law school, and the predictability of his prospects already chafed. Before long, he fell in love with an environmental attorney named Susan Daggett, whose relish of the legal practice clarified his suspicion that he was in the wrong profession. They married, and when she was offered a good job with a nonprofit organization in Denver he gave up the East Coast and the law with some relief.

A bit at a loss about what to do in Denver, Bennet had applied for a job in the investment company of Philip Anschutz, a political conservative whose business in oil, railroads, and telecommunications had made him one of the country's wealthiest men. Bennet's liberal friends were dubious, and Anschutz's people were, too. Anschutz recalled, "While he'd held a string of prestigious jobs, there was internal controversy about hiring him, since he lacked a business background and some of the necessary practical skills. But I was impressed with his presence—the quiet, understated intelligence, the quality of being both well read and open-minded." Anschutz offered him an entry-level, sixty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year position on the condition that he attend, at his own expense, evening classes in accounting and finance. Three years later, Bennet was a managing director of the company, at work consolidating failed movie-theatre chains into the largest theatre chain in the world. ("You'll never hear me say I want to run the schools like a business," Bennet liked to tell Denver's teachers. "I made my liv-

"I want someone whose inner pain is totally hot."

• •

ing off of bankrupt ones.") He was in his late thirties, with two young daughters, and more money than he knew what to do with, since his most expensive avocation, sailing, was difficult to pursue in the Rockies. In 2003, when Hickenlooper was elected mayor, Bennet gave up several million dollars in unvested shares to become Hickenlooper's chief of staff.

Hickenlooper had also forsaken millions of dollars to work for the city. He became a popular mayor, able to generate support, in a historically libertarian milieu, for government schemes to protect the environment and house the homeless. Bennet, meanwhile, earned a reputation as the hidden mayor. "Half the time, he didn't want *me* to know what was going on," Hickenlooper told me, laughing. The two friends act like brothers, with the rivalrous impulses that this implies, but they generally agreed about the schools. Despite Denver's economic revitalization, the willingness of the teachers' union to take risks, and the passage of a three-hundred-million-dollar bond for school improvement, the schools weren't getting better fast enough. Hickenlooper thought that the district needed Bennet's implementation skills and tenacity.

Bennet is not by nature introspective. "The examined life is not worth living," he sometimes says, and as he drove us toward Manual he claimed not to have lost a minute's sleep over the decision to close it. "I'd like to get to a place where it's not the superintendent saying, 'You need a better school than this'; it's the community expecting and asking for that," he said. "But, until good schools are demand-driven, you need a proxy for the demand. Voting rights weren't demanded for a long time, either, and I don't think the analogy to the civil-rights movement is far-fetched at all."

But, if closing Manual High was the right decision, the protests helped Bennet realize that he had been imperious in the process of making it—neglecting to keep parents and students informed as he considered and reconsidered his ideas. Many in the community now regarded him as a liar as well as a racist, and were skeptical of a compensatory promise he had made: to redesign and reopen Manual as a model high school, beginning with ninth graders in 2007 and adding a grade each subsequent year.

The idea of gradually reopening Manual troubled the part of his mind that made cost-benefit calculations. Shrinking enrollments in the district had generated more than a million square feet of surplus classroom space, and little practical need for the school. But after the popular backlash, he found himself soliciting residents' advice about the sort of programs they'd like to see at a new and improved Manual High. The next time Bennet moved to close a troubled school—and he had a wish list—he thought that he would demonstrate more patience. He indicated this intention while caroming around corners, liberally interpreting stop signs, sipping coffee, encapsulating the academic history and test scores of every school he passed, admiring images on his periphery—three straight-backed Mexican women with red parasols promenading down a razed city block, like a barrio Seurat—and chatting on the phone with his wife, who was home with their daughters. Only when he pulled into the Manual parking lot did his timing seem off. He banged into a parking barricade, sending notebooks and budget reports flying.

He had expected the school to be empty on a Sunday. Entering the lobby, however, he was surprised to hear cymbals crashing and women's voices rising in the darkened auditorium. He peered in and saw a hundred hat brims: wide ones wrapped in cotton batting or festooned with plastic roses; skinny ones with dotted-swiss veils. A neighborhood church was borrowing the space for its services, and within seconds the preacher's voice thundered over his choir: "My eyes fool me not! Here is Michael Bennet, the *overseer* of all these school changes."

Bennet was trapped. The preacher summoned him to a makeshift pulpit on the stage, and the parishioners, mostly black, surged forward. Their hisses were soft, this being church.

To some of Bennet's aides, the rancor in the community seemed incoherent: the man was trying, after all, to help their children. But over the last ten years the parents and grandparents in the auditorium had seen reform plans come and go: no-fail policies, parent contracts, pay-for-performance incentives, critical friends' groups, inquiry-based learning programs, something called Advancement Via Individual Determination, and the Gates small-school model. Bennet's proposal seemed part of the usual cycle: reformist passion, disappointing gains, dereliction.

Standing among the elders, who were swaying in satiny robes, Bennet looked a good deal more wood sprite than God. He began by apologizing for his unpolished shoes. Then he apologized for his absence of neckwear, for his lack of prepared remarks, and for rushing the Manual decision. After that, he hung his head for a moment, as if he didn't know what to say next. In the weeks since his critics had called him a racist, Bennet had taken to quoting Martin Luther King, so I was braced for a bit of mellifluous, marginally relevant oration. Instead, Bennet's flight of ingratiation ended. "Last year, on the tenth-grade math test, only thirty-three African-Americans in the entire district passed," he resumed flatly. The swaying stopped. "Thirty-three—in the entire city and county of Denver, Colorado. And only sixty-one Latinos. This is a fight."

For Julissa Torrez and her sisters, school was the easy part. The rest of their childhoods had been marked by so many untimely deaths and violent incidents that they thought their family was the object of a hex—one beyond the scope of the Mexican grandmothers in the neighborhood, whose white magic involved feathers, bathtubs, and eggs. One day after school, Julissa knelt on the floor of her living room, sighed over a recent poem—"After murder, everything feels absurder"—and picked up the Manual yearbook. She studied the photographs intently, and, after a while, took a pen topped with a pink marabou feather and put a small "x" beside some of the names. Nicanor, Angélica, Samantha: "What I hear, they're dropping out."

The living room was appointed with plastic ferns and paintings of Jesus; on the sofa, her sister Zerina, Manual's impending valedictorian, wept. Earlier in the week, she'd given birth to a daughter. Julissa's mother had been born with half an arm, and she sat nearby, expertly balancing the newborn on the stump while using her hand to make phone calls: first to see about replacing the Medicaid card that had been in her purse, which had just been stolen, and then to her eldest daughter, Dominique, who was at the hospital awaiting tests regarding a precancerous condition in "the girl parts." At the calls' conclusion, Julissa's seven-year-old half brother, Isaiah—the product of her mother's relationship with a drug addict who was subsequently imprisoned—removed a Pop-Ice from his mouth and cried for attention. But at that moment a pregnant neighbor appeared at the screen door, also in tears. Prenatal tests, she informed everyone, suggested that her child would be born disabled. The attendant hugs and offerings of Pop-Ices were interrupted by an official from the housing authority, who stopped her car in front of the house and yelled at the family for not watering the lawn.

Julissa remained transfixed by the yearbook on her knees. Candido, Desiree, another Desiree, Vincente, Ebony, Kia, James, Sigourney, Mya, Crystal, Elijio, Mercedes, Ieasha. "Some kids were going to quit anyway—their families need them to work and all," she said. "But, for a lot of people, Manual is home, and it's like now we're being taken away and put in foster care, where maybe we won't be wanted. You'll be showing up, having to start over, in a place where everyone thinks you're dumb. And, besides, what if you choose a school and Bennet closes that one, too? They say he's going to be closing all the minority schools, eventually." She turned a page. "This girl says she's going to South High, but honestly? I don't think she's going to make it." Julissa lost her train of thought then, the pink-feathered pen hovering over a photograph of Norberto. Lately, it occurred to her, he'd been keeping his eyes to himself.

"Hold everything! The P.R. department just sent over this chart."

Manual lacked air-conditioning, and by the first week in May the climate inside the school was better suited to growing papayas than to learning, although neither activity was being attempted. One morning, in a room with a poster of Einstein over the door, an inspirational speaker dispensed advice to Manual's graduating seniors: "A grateful attitude will take you a long way!" Meanwhile, other imminent graduates were hauling garbage to two Dumpsters that sat next to the bleachers. "Our teacher decided that cleaning up could be our final exam," one boy explained.

A student's right to trade a bad school for a better one is a cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act. The Manual closing simply forced the issue for an entire student body. There were twelve traditional public high schools in Denver, and while Bennet considered only three to be in good shape, most had strong academic offerings and higher test scores than Manual. To the students, though, test scores and course offerings were not dispositive. Most chose their new school based on whether a friend or a cousin was already enrolled, and able to offer a fig leaf of social protection. Julissa decided to follow a favorite guidance counsellor, Mr. Durgin, to South, a large and racially diverse school five miles away, which offered courses ranging from Japanese to Advanced Placement music theory.

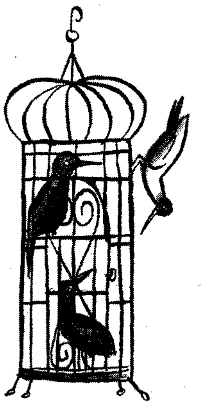
One Tuesday morning in May, South guidance counsellors arrived at Manual to help Julissa and the other incoming students choose their classes for the fall. Bennet had planned the day in the hope of generating some excitement about the next academic year, and the South counsellors seemed capable of carrying out his directive. Led by a silver-haired woman with a voice made for bedtime stories, they met with Julissa and the other students one by one, asking about their hopes for the future (careers in massage therapy figured large); analyzing transcripts for glimmers of academic strength; and gently advocating college-prep coursework for students who asked questions like "European history—so what's that about?" and "Is geology the thing with the maps?"

"I think you're ready for more of a challenge," they insisted to student after student, a few of whom stiffened and shrugged. But, leaving the room, Julissa and most of her classmates felt pleased in their choice of classes, and of school. "Lady was banging," concluded a boy who had shaved notches in his eyebrows, to indicate the gang he belonged to. "And South ain't no ghetto school, either." The counsellors, however, looked aghast. A hundred and sixty-eight Manual students were scheduled to attend South that fall. A hundred and five of them hadn't shown up.

Down the hall, counsellors from other high schools were meeting their incoming students, though not all the welcomes were warm. An influx of terrible students can quickly turn a school that has been making decent progress by the standards of No Child Left Behind into a failing institution.

Norberto had chosen North High, five miles from home, because it was where the cheerful retired major who ran his J.R.O.T.C. program was being transferred. He didn't know that Bennet was hinting he might close North, too, barring swift, dramatic improvement that Norberto and the other incoming Manualites were unlikely to spur. The North counsellors examined no transcripts and asked few questions about goals, and, when a special-ed student wandered in bouncing a basketball, an irritated counsellor shooed him out and shut the classroom door. The door automatically locked, and soon other aspiring North students were milling in the hallway, unable to get in. This lockout ran counter to Bennet's hopes, but it seemed to fulfill the students' expectations. As a rule, strangers weren't eager to meet them.

Three days earlier, their prom had taken place in a suburban hotel whose gift shop sold Rolaids and Liberty Bell paperweights stamped "Denver." The conference room where they danced was bleak—the decorating committee had funds for only twenty balloons—so excitement built at the discovery, down a hallway by the check-in counter, of a fountain in a grotto of plastic rhododendrons. This display was intended as a backdrop for wedding and *quinceañera* photographs, and the teen-agers headed over to pose. However, their orange stilettos, blue Mohawks, snake-head canes, and trilbies with two-foot-long feathers startled the tourists arriving at check-in, and the manager had a word with a Manual principal. The students left the grotto just as those locked out of the classroom now shrugged and headed for the exits: coolly, as if this outcome had been their choice.



The Denver Public Schools headquarters is a gray hulk on Grant Street, downtown, in the geographic limbo between the Governor's Mansion and the titanium rhomboids of the Denver Art Museum. The central feature of the superintendent's office, on the top floor, is a shiny conference table; on it, during a meeting shortly after registration day, lay piles of spreadsheets and the increasingly weary head of Michael Bennet.

Despite the controversy, Bennet had, by the end of his first school year, built up a fan base of sorts. Principals, initially skeptical of his reforms, now seemed enthusiastic, and Comcast, Whole Foods, Crate and Barrel, and the city's business élite had helped raise five million dollars—a record amount—toward their implementation. The Denver *Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* were following his progress closely and intelligently, and Bill Clinton would soon show up at one of Bennet's training workshops for principals, to cheer them on. The plan to rescue the Manual students, on the other hand, was a bust. "Wait," Bennet told his aides when he lifted his head from the table. "Can you just tell me what the biggest problem is?" A senior adviser, Brad Jupp, replied, "The answer to that is that every problem sucks."

The rescue plan depended heavily on mentors, of whom Bennet had recruited nearly two hundred and fifty in two months with the help of local nonprofit organizations. Mostly white professionals, and many experienced in mentoring, they were prepared to follow their assigned children until the end of 2006, when the students would theoretically be settled in their new schools. But suspicion ran so deep among the students that half of them refused the offer. And the children who did accept mentors barely saw them, because the schools forbade private meetings until the adults had gone through lengthy criminal-background checks. In the interim, more students dropped out of the program, and even ice-cream socials weren't luring them back.

On Grant Street, Bennet had surrounded himself with some brilliant, determined people, among them Brad Jupp, who had helped design the model program to pay teachers for increasing achievement and, in an earlier incarnation as a middle-school teacher, persuaded inner-city adolescents to share his love of Ezra Pound. Jupp feared that Bennet's increasing obsession with Manual was consuming a disproportionate amount of time. There were five or six other troubled high schools in the district; an entire middle-school program in need of reform; and overcrowded elementary-school classrooms whose amelioration would cost millions of dollars that the district didn't have. The teachers upon whom everything depended were overwhelmed by new curricula and grading standards, and considered Bennet's proposal for a salary increase—two per cent—disrespectful. Meanwhile, Bennet's top aides were rushing to pick up the soda for the next gathering of mentors and students at Manual, or hastily assembling a college fair in the gym, or trying to find out why one Manual principal had sent students to a course in rope climbing when they

"I caught it sniffing around our garbage."

should have been registering for next year's classes.

"But these are the last weeks before we lose these kids for the summer," Bennet told Jupp, his voice unusually plaintive. He rose from the conference table, phoned another top administrator, and sent him off to Manual, too. There were five hundred and fifty-eight students now left at Manual, and many citizens saw the fate of those children as emblematic of the broader reform, and of the sincerity of his commitment to minority kids.

After a semester of being yelled at by Julissa and her peers, Bennet had begun to see them more clearly, and to see as well that, in his ardor to save them, he had managed to add to their troubles. He'd been asking them to be optimistic about their futures, and about their intellectual capabilities—capabilities no longer abstract to him—while simultaneously broadcasting the evidence that their education had thus far been a farce. As Norberto put it, "Manual gave me my pride back, then Bennet took the pride away."

In the past, when Bennet had been faced with a complex problem, his charm had helped him solve it. But, to the Manual students, that quality—they called it slickness—was simply a part of his privilege. They knew that he was a millionaire and had gone to a fancy private high school—more, they contended in anger, than the man would ever know about them.

In a neighborhood whose stores were fronted with orange banners—"Glass Pipes for Sale!!"—the odds were high that a former drug dealer would backslide, so parents, friends, and relatives hedged their bets. Thus it was only at the end of Norberto's junior year that he realized he wasn't his family's big loser anymore. A male cousin had gone to federal prison, female cousins were leaving school to have babies, and he alone still had a chance to get a high-school diploma.

Absorbing that spring's talk of high expectations, he'd begun to think that his former goal, to supervise a drywall crew, had been set a little too low. And perhaps the wisdom of his elder relations regarding college—"If you study too much, you forget to get married until you're so old that nobody wants you"—contained an element of self-justification? But to have expectations, it seemed to him, a person had to have a sense that his life was in his control.

"People say, 'Oh, your family can't get ahead,' but actually we get ahead all the time," he said. "It's just that then one of the trucks breaks—my dad and I need them for the jobs—or one of my parents is out of work, then we slip right back down." He thought that he coped fairly well during slippages: "For one thing, I found this store where you can get twenty cups of noodles, the supposably shrimpy kind, for four dollars and forty cents." But extreme poverty gave his mother "worry breakdowns," and, on and off all spring, these had dictated that he miss classes to work full time. Typically, his grades fell when he took such jobs, and the additional income was not guaranteed: the drywall crew most willing to hire him contained some heavy drinkers, given to sleeping through Mondays and getting the whole crew fired. Back at school, he'd find his teachers as angry as his bosses had been. Then he'd go home to the basement and cry. He knew only one line of work in which he could earn the money his family needed while keeping his dream of a diploma alive, and the Southside Sureños had let him know that they were hiring.

Arriving at the Manual graduation, Bennet was braced for anger, and, when he passed out diplomas, some graduates refused to shake his hand. To his relief, though, most had come to celebrate. One of the graduation speakers cried out, to bedlam, "We're the future, like it or not!" Afterward, Bennet went back to work.

He was going to try something new that summer for the five hundred and fifty-eight. Since taking the job, he had thought a lot about his own education, with its challenges, expectations, and webs of social connections; he knew that his adulthood would have looked quite different had he lacked them. So he arranged a summer internship at a law firm for his mentee, one of the shyest boys in the school, and opened a wing of Manual as a computer-filled "resource center," where counsellors might make similar connections for others. Many children were too busy working to avail themselves of the center's tutoring, internship, and college-planning services, but Julissa made herself at home. She began to advise the adults on what Manual should offer when it reopened as a model high school while considering prospects of her own. An official in the city government's youth-development program had been impressed by her spirit during the protest, and now urged her to take a summer job with the city.

She'd worked every summer since she was thirteen, including a stint as a roofer for a dollar an hour. The city youth program paid nine times that much—real, family-helping money, especially since her fourteen-year-old sister, Ashley, stood a chance of being hired, too. So one afternoon, after several changes of T-shirts, the two girls took the bus and the light rail to southwest Denver to be interviewed. Their appointment was in a neighborhood that felt like a suburb, as it had commuter colleges, big-box stores, and a Six Flags amusement park. They were excited, until they got off the train.

It was the beginning of rush hour, and the large intersection outside the station was snarled with traffic. Julissa and Ashley surveyed the scene uncertainly, as the lights changed three times. Finally, they tore, heads down, across one boulevard, then another, keeping the pace as they approached a residential block of white frame houses. "I represent East Side and I don't know who represents what here," Julissa said unhappily, eyes darting from left to right. "No idea."

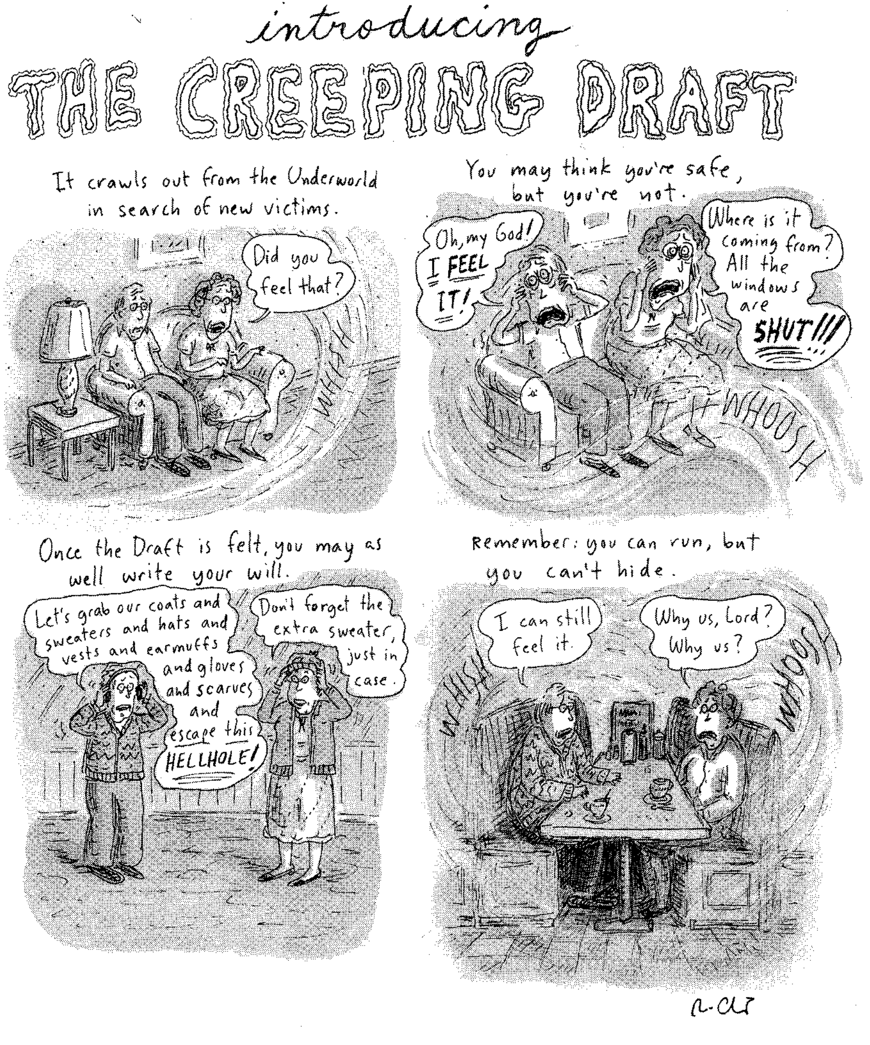
Their directions had involved landmarks—the parking lot of a store called King Soopers, a Taco Bell. But which Taco Bell? Or was it Burger King? Panicked and confused, they went off course. Julissa used up her cell-phone minutes calling her mother for moral and directional support; her eldest sister, Dominique, rushed over from her workplace to serve as a guide. Eventually, an hour after getting off the train, they found the government building. On the elevator, the girls pressed against the wall as if pinned by centrifugal force—"Hate elevators," Julissa said—and reached the office just as it was closing. "Oh, don't worry, just come back next week," a friendly receptionist said. Julissa tried to smile back. It was not a journey she wanted to make again.

South High sat in an equally mysterious part of town, and, despite the reassurance of resource-center counsellors, its appeal faded, too. "I don't want to just stick to my kind, but I'm scared to go," she said. Ashley, who had been accepted into a small, competitive program at another public high school, was uneasy, too, and, anyway, there were flyers at Wal-Mart about a publicly funded online charter school a few blocks from home. One of the people involved with the program had been a Denver Nugget, and his daughter was the R. & B. singer India.Arie. Students did their work on the Internet, and it was graded by teachers in an office somewhere else. Plus, they could train to be nurses or doctors, or something; the details weren't clear. Still, after a stressful year, the chance to stay near home, with Internet access and relational proximity to India.Arie, seemed soothing, so two of Manual's star students changed their plans.

"DENVER SCHOOLS PICK UP THE PACE," read the headline in the *Rocky Mountain News* one day in August. Although Bennet's ideas still hadn't been fully implemented, his district was posting historic increases on state exams in reading—single-year increases that were greater, in grades five through ten, than in the past four years combined. Math scores were up, too, and minority children had improved more than white children—though it would take eighteen more years of such incremental improvement for the minority kids to pull even.

Bennet considered the instruments of standardized testing primitive, and their results incomplete. Besides, a single year's increase could be a fluke—or the fruit of a predecessor's efforts. Still, if a person held the numbers up to a certain light, after a celebratory bourbon, he might see in them the power of plain and unrelenting expectation.

For a few days, feeling hopeful, Bennet tried to relax. He read a book of Buddhist reflections, and many "Mr. Putter & Tabby" books with his daughters. Some mornings, though, he woke up with a feeling that had chased him all summer, of something unpleasant about to occur. He sensed that he was about to fail at something he'd worked

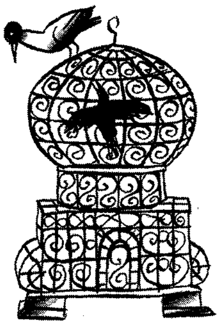

introducing
THE CREEPING DRAFT
It crawls out from the Underworld in search of new victims.
Did you feel that?
You may think you're safe, but you're not.
Oh, my God! I FEEL IT!
Where is it coming from? All the windows are SHUT!!!
WHOOSH
Once the Draft is felt, you may as well write your will.
Let's grab our coats and sweaters and hats and vests and earmuffs and gloves and scarves and escape this HELLHOLE!
Don't forget the extra sweater, just in case.
Remember: you can run, but you can't hide.
I can still feel it.
Why us, Lord? Why us?
WHISH
WHOOSH

hard at, and for the life of him he didn't know why.

It was his particular skill, his wife believed, to distinguish the worthy challenges from the impossible ones. But when he ran into Manual parents and students and inquired about plans for September, their answers struck him as alarmingly vague. It seemed increasingly clear that, despite his efforts, he had failed to reach the five hundred and fifty-eight. A mass dropout now seemed likely.

Driving through his neighborhood one Saturday with all this on his mind, he passed an election sign with a familiar name on it. One of his friends in Democratic politics had started a run for the state senate. From past experience, Bennet could envision how the candidate would spend that summer weekend, and every other one until November: studying maps marked by colored pins showing clusters of voters, then going out to knock on hundreds of doors. He called an aide, a veteran of political campaigns, and asked, Could we capture some children this way?

A strapping boy named Pedro, half-awake, half-naked, stared perplexed through a torn screen door. "Sorry to wake you up," Bennet said. It was a Saturday morning last fall. "We're from the schools. Can we come in?" The boy put on a shirt, and Bennet and Jaime Aquino, his chief academic adviser, walked into a living room crammed with beds. One of them was occupied by a boy who slept through their entrance, an announcer on a blaring television saying, "A lot of people have been talking about this, it's a revolution in blackjack tournaments," and the frantic barks of two emaciated Chihuahuas clad in zip-up hoodies, which had come skidding into the room. School had started five weeks earlier, but Pedro had not shown up, according to the printout that Bennet held in his hand. "So you're a senior," he began, over the barking. "Can I sit down?" For a moment, the boy studied the man settling in on a sofa between some boxer shorts and an aquarium that reeked of decay. And then, in a Spanish somewhat different from what Bennet recalled from St. Albans, Pedro began to map the distance between Bennet's ideas and his own economic obligations.



First, Pedro wanted it noted: his younger sister, one of the five hundred and fifty-eight, was continuing high school, and he was proud of her. But because of family finances, he had dropped out to work the night shift at McDonald's—a job he'd held for a year despite not having a car to get him home at two in the morning. Mentors and college fairs were beside the point. Pedro looked expectant when he finished, as if hoping for a thanks and goodbye, but Bennet and Aquino had begun to confer. After a year, the boy was a proven employee, and there was another McDonald's within walking distance of a high school that offered evening classes. If he transferred to that restaurant and switched over to the day shift—what were the hours of the day shift, exactly? It would work, then: Pedro could attend school after his shift, and get work-study credit for the job. Bennet's aides could call the managers of both restaurants, and get things moving along.

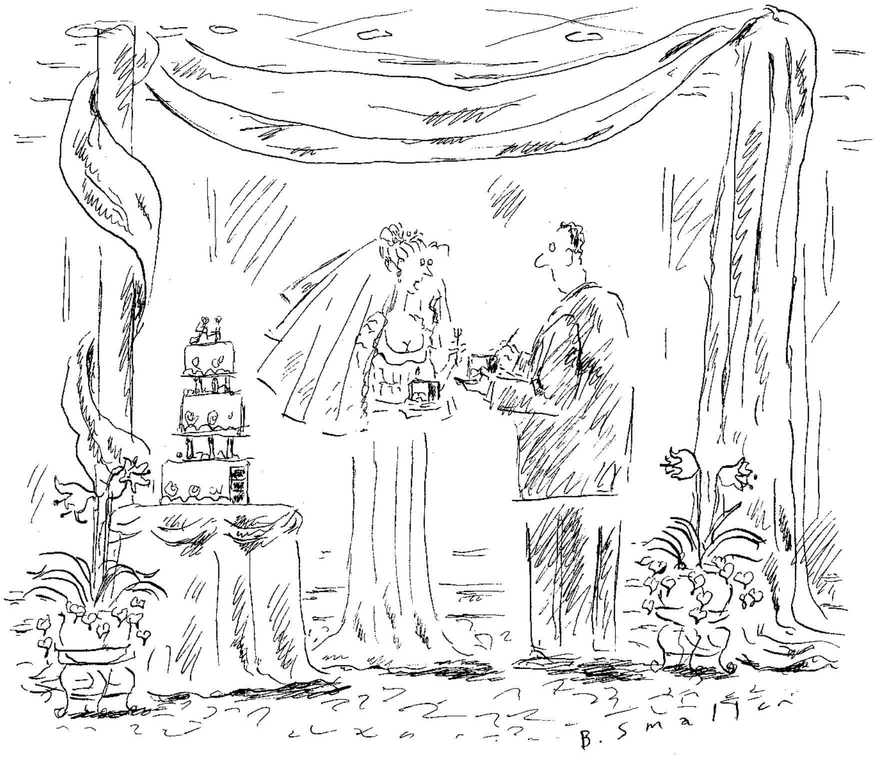
For nine weeks, Bennet and two dozen aides and volunteers had been fanning out across neighborhoods like Pedro's, trying to sell school to skeptical kids. The campaign had been harder to start than a political one, since many of its targets were illegal and didn't want to be found, and the goal was not just a trip to the polls. Still, with the help of Julissa and seven other students who were hired as peer counsellors and part-time sleuths, the district managed to locate all but ten of the former Manual students. Weekend visits began, and hundreds of reclamation projects got under way. "Oh, I'm in school, it's going great," said almost every child to whom Bennet spoke, especially on the days when Univision sent a cameraman to accompany him. Then he got better at asking the questions.

In the first month of school, four hundred and sixty-three former Manual students showed up—a better rate of return than after previous summers, and a number that averted a public-relations debacle. The first weeks meant little, though: math had not yet become confusing and term papers weren't due. Bennet and his people kept pounding on doors and shaking chain-link gates—better not to surprise the dogs, they'd learned. And the number of children in school held steady.

Aides rode the bus with pregnant girls, showing them a school where they could bring their babies, and argued with parents about the value of a high-school diploma. A band of outreach workers, the educational equivalents of repo men, arranged part-time jobs and night-school curricula for other resisters. "We've been trying to erect reforms over this weak political, economic, and cultural scaffolding," Bennet said after one long day of visits. "It's not impossible, but, God, it's really, really hard." Absenteeism remained high, and every success was contingent; it took a month to get Pedro into school, whereupon he failed all of his courses. But one rainy night last fall the head repo man, Steve Dobo, sensed that something had changed when he asked a young man hanging out on a corner if he knew how to find a certain kid. "You the police?" was what he expected, along with the rolling of eyes. Instead he got "You the schools?"

Bennet didn't have much time, then, to think through what he'd set in motion: a systematic pursuit of the sort of student who lowered aggregate test scores and teacher morale. Owing to a statewide crackdown on illegal immigrants, kindergartners were showing up at school without a record of a home or a parent; teachers were complaining that the pace of reform left them exhausted; and he'd started a crusade against the lacklustre achievement at North High—this time, involving the community first.

Still, the fight to reclaim the former Manual students had no precedent in the age of No Child Left Behind. Out of panic, and of motivations that involved personal vanity as well as social justice, a safety net was being strung under a school system's hardest cases—one involving parents, mentors, fast-food restaurant managers, United Airlines executives and city-council members who knocked on doors, an engrossed media, nonprofit organizations, and student leaders like Julissa Torrez. Meanwhile, Bennet had persuaded foundations to donate staff and funds to keep the tracking effort going for three years, after which the effort's impact would be studied for application in other Denver schools, and in other cities, too. The notion of high expectations for poor children had been converted from the rhetorical to the specific and pragmatic, and a rescue effort that once seemed a sinkhole of time and effort began to look like a prototype.



"Your piece is bigger!"

Norberto Felix-Cruz knew that something was up when he returned from work one Saturday evening to hear that he'd missed a visit from a freckled guy in sneakers, and, more important, a reporter from "9NEWS." They wanted to know what he and his cousins were thinking about school. What Norberto was thinking was simple: fear of jail had ruled out drug dealing that summer, and now the lack of drug-dealing income ruled out school. But, as he did his drywall the next week, he wondered whether the man in sneakers was in league with the J.R.O.T.C. teacher, who seemed to be on his case, too.

People were waiting for him at North High; that was the line, and he didn't quite believe it, since his presence in school had barely registered before. But, on his way to and from work, he passed kids whose presence had registered even less than his own, kids whom Julissa had marked, in her yearbook, with an "x." They were heading to the bus stop with backpacks of books. They wore T-shirts that said "Manual Survivor." One morning after a job was finished and the rent had been paid, he drove to North High and enrolled. J.R.O.T.C. was social death there, too, so the battalion-commander job was his. It felt O.K., until he was driving home on the freeway a week later, and the driver next to him lost control of his car. Norberto was unhurt, but the truck on which his jobs depended had five thousand dollars' worth of damage. His mother told him to quit North High the next day.

However, when the insurance payment arrived, three weeks later, and put the family debts in order, Norberto decided to try again. The only school near his house was an online charter school like Julissa's; it recruited from the juvenile-justice system, and didn't aim high. But it was the best shot he had at a diploma, and he took it.

"What bugs me is how the principal tries to identify," Norberto said to Julissa one cloudless autumn afternoon. "He says stuff like 'I know where you boys are coming from, you gangstas, caught up in the 'hood.' " They were riding in the patched-up truck, comparing their new schools. Norberto was doing well, and liked his math and art teachers. "They don't help you all that much—you're sort of on your own," he said. "But I guess I'll be on my own in real life, too." Julissa was similarly ambivalent: the kids in her online school looked at MySpace instead of studying, and there didn't seem to be any books. However, with the encouragement of several mentors whom she'd acquired while working on the Manual rescue, she was about to transfer to Thomas Jefferson, one of the stronger public high schools in the city.

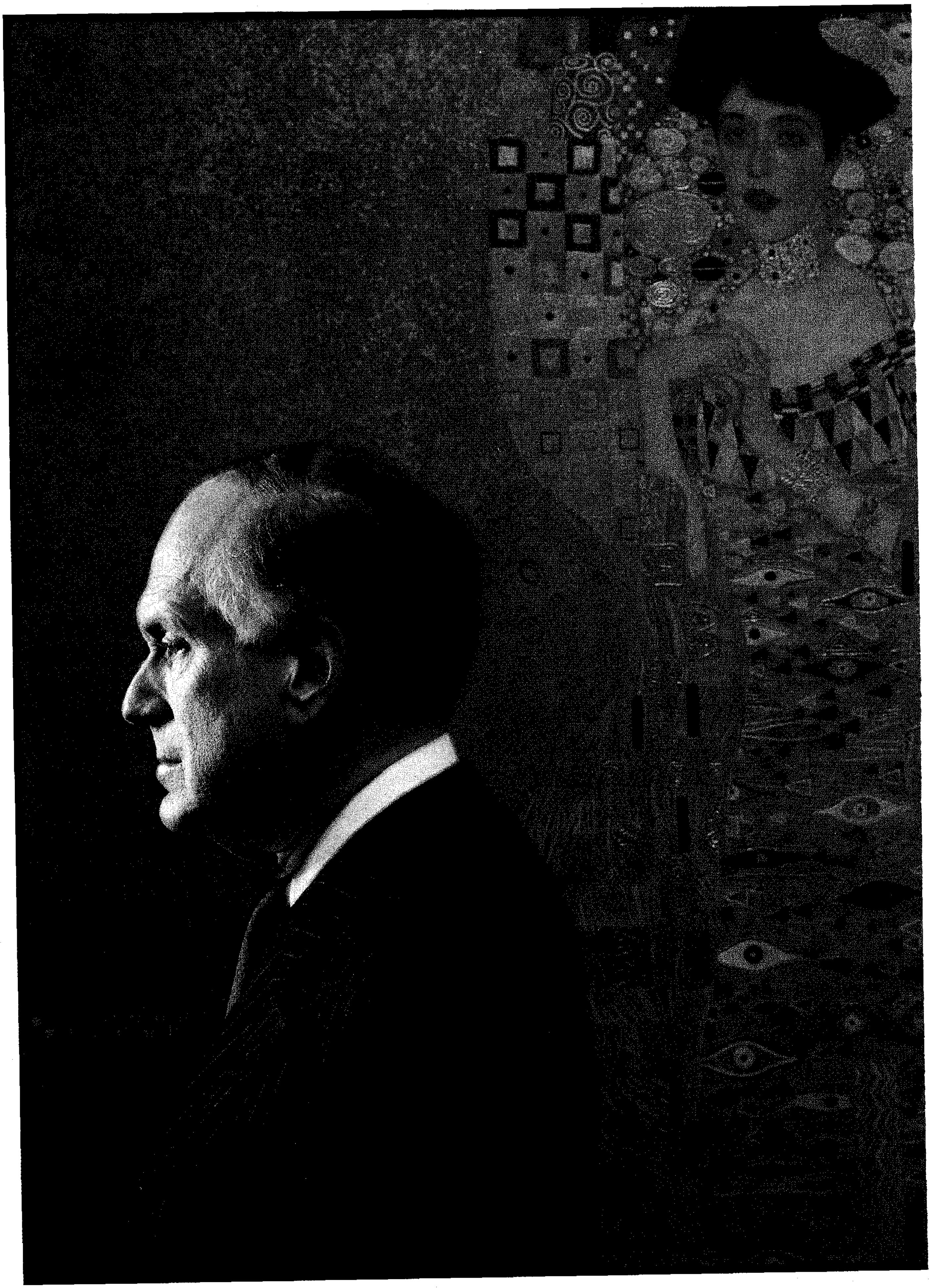
"The principal there, Sandra—I'm getting to know her, and you can just tell she's out there for kids," she told Norberto. She added that she now had a "meetings notebook" in addition to her poetry one, and that Sandra's cell-phone number was in it. "It's where I scribble things down when I go visit the parents who don't have time to come to community meetings, or when we talk about what the new Manual should look like, or when I do a pop-up visit at a high school—like, when a Manual student calls the center and says she's being mistreated. I've got Bennet's cell-phone number in there, too."

Norberto said, "Like, for me this school year, I'm letting my spark up, trying to focus. But sometimes, you know, I can't even sleep. I miss school for work, and, ten years into the future, all I am is a dropout."

"Yeah, I have to miss school, too, to do my pop-ups."

"Hey, Julissa. I didn't say you. I was talking about me, Norberto. I was trying to tell you—"

He braked hard: a police standoff, twelve officers kneeling behind sedans, guns pointed at a small brown house. He swerved down a side street as Julissa leaned out the window, trying to watch their backs. "The eleven-year-old with the Uzi, no one wants to get to the core of it," he murmured, and then let the subject go. Julissa was full of fresher conversation, and he was going to have to work to keep up. ♦



PROFILES

AN ACQUIRING EYE

Ronald Lauder's career in collecting art.

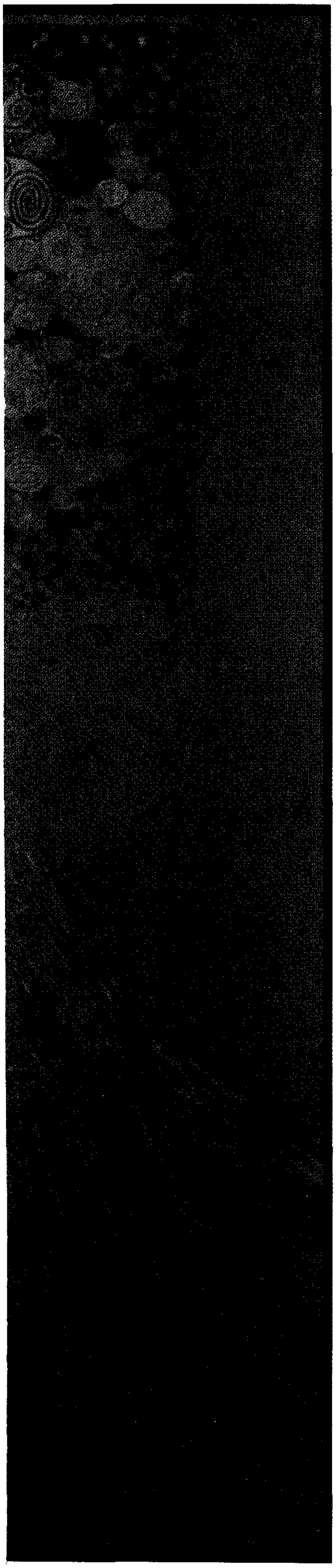
BY REBECCA MEAD

The Neue Galerie, a museum at Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street that is dedicated to Austrian and German art, occupies the former home of Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt III, and is the kind of place that is usually described as a jewel box: compact, exquisite, and filled with things that conspicuously display the wealth and taste of its owner. That owner is Ronald S. Lauder—the cosmetics heir, businessman, philanthropist, former ambassador, and sometime mayoral candidate—and one recent afternoon he made his way through the museum, checking on the jewels.

It was an hour before the doors were to open for a cocktail party celebrating the latest exhibition—a show of domestic interiors designed by Josef Hoffmann, the Viennese architect, in the early part of the twentieth century—and last-minute preparations were being made. In an upstairs gallery, someone vacuumed specks of dust from the inside of a case that contained examples of Hoffmann's sleek tableware designs; downstairs, waiters were arranging champagne flutes on silver trays. Lauder, who opened the Neue Galerie five years ago and drops by several days a week when he is in New York City, surveyed an austere master-bedroom suite that, in an impressive feat of curatorial persuasion, had been borrowed from a Viennese family, the Salzers, in whose home it remains in daily use. "These people are sleeping on cots," Lauder said, with a note of satisfaction; later that evening, he was to host a dinner for the Salzer matriarch and her son by way of recompense. In another gallery, Lauder stepped into a reconstructed *Mädchenzimmer*—a girl's room, from 1904, with a twin bed, a dresser, and a vanity—and adjusted a curtain hanging from a closet rail, to the mock dismay of the museum's director, Renée Price, who was accompanying him on his tour. "Sir, sir, we take our shoes off when we walk on the felt—it will get marked!" Price cried. Lauder stepped off the carpeting, which appeared unsullied by his trespass. "Well, maybe not by limousine riders," Price conceded.

Lauder, who is the younger son of the late Estée Lauder and is estimated to be worth $2.7 billion, is sixty-two years old. He was dressed formally, as he invariably is, in a monogrammed white shirt and a blue pin-striped suit that was made by hand for him in Milan. He has graying hair, which he wears brushed back from his temples. His eyes are heavy-lidded and lugubrious, his voice low and unmodulated, his smile cautious. He is just under six feet four inches tall, and moves with the self-consciousness of one who, having inadvertently claimed more than his fair share of vertical space, is careful not to dominate the horizontal. When he gesticulates, as he does to express the enthusiasm that his subdued demeanor might otherwise fail to convey, the movement is all below the elbow, like that of a reluctant swimmer splashing waist deep in cold water.

The current object of Lauder's greatest enthusiasm, and the most glittering jewel in his museum, is on the second floor: "Adele Bloch-Bauer I," by Gustav Klimt. The painting was commissioned in 1903 by Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, a wealthy Jewish Viennese industrialist and the husband of its twenty-five-year-old subject, the flush-faced, sensuous-lipped, richly bejewelled Adele Bloch-Bauer. She was a well-known hostess whom Klimt depicted in a sinuous golden gown and robe, against an abstracted golden background, looking like a Byzantine socialite who has just set down her cigarette holder and is about to discuss the latest symphony by that



Ronald Lauder with Gustav Klimt's "Adele Bloch-Bauer I" (1903), which he bought for a hundred and thirty-five million dollars. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

terribly interesting composer Gustav Mahler.

For sixty-five years, the portrait hung in the Belvedere Palace, in Vienna, which houses the Austrian state's incomparable collection of Klimts, including the artist's most famous work, "The Kiss." Eight years ago, however, Adele Bloch-Bauer's heirs began efforts to reclaim the painting, which Austria had appropriated from Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer during the Nazi era. A year ago, a government panel declared that the painting, along with four other Klimts formerly owned by Bloch-Bauer that had been hanging in the Belvedere, was the property of his heirs, among them Maria Altmann—the ninety-year-old niece of Adele Bloch-Bauer, who lives in Los Angeles. Several months later, while the painting was on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the news broke that Lauder had bought it, on behalf of the Neue Galerie, for a hundred and thirty-five million dollars—at the time the highest price ever paid for a work of art, surpassing by thirty-one million dollars the previous record, for Picasso's "Boy with a Pipe," in 2004.

Lauder has been a serious collector for decades—he owns about four thousand works—and his discernment is widely admired in the art world. Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, says of him, "There are lots of people who can tell the difference between something great and something very good. He can tell the different between great and exceptional." He calls Lauder's private holdings "the finest collection of modern art assembled by an individual in the world today." (For many years, Lauder was the chairman of MOMA, and Lowry's museum stands to profit considerably from the fruits of Lauder's connoisseurship when the time comes.) The Klimt purchase has placed Lauder in the select group of individuals whose desire to acquire superlative works of art has been matched by a willingness to pay any sum to acquire them, a pantheon that includes H. E. Huntington, who bought Gainsborough's "Blue Boy" for seven hundred and twenty-nine thousand dollars in 1921, and Andrew Mellon, who paid eight hundred and thirty-six thousand dollars for Raphael's "Niccolini-Cowper Madonna" in 1928.

The legacies of these men have become beloved public institutions: the "Blue Boy" is the cornerstone of the Huntington Library's art collection, in San Marino, California, and Mellon's collection is the foundation of the National Gallery, in Washington. The Neue Galerie, too, was created not just for the private pleasure of its owner but also for the edification of the public, and not since Henry Clay Frick bestowed his home and art works upon the city has New York been the beneficiary of so impassioned, meticulous, and prodigal a collector. Lauder has strong pedagogical inclinations—one gets the impression that he would happily stand in his museum all day long, explaining Egon Schiele's use of graphic distortion to bemused Dutch tourists—and for him the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer is both a gorgeous object and a historical document of critical importance to the museum's mission. "Klimt's greatest painting is 'The Kiss,' which I also love," Lauder told me one day. "But Ferdinand and Adele personified Vienna at that time. The Viennese Jews were a very special world unto themselves—they had Sigmund Freud, they had great writers, they had great musicians. And here was Adele Bloch-Bauer, painted by Gustav Klimt, the greatest artist of that time in Austria. This was the personification of what was happening. She had a salon, she had a personality, and you can feel that personality. Unlike 'The Kiss,' this is a painting that is alive."

The portrait hangs high on a wall, in a white frame behind glass, in the museum's main gallery—Mrs. Vanderbilt's music room. Lauder has been spending a lot of time with the painting since July, when it arrived, contemplating it alone for an hour at a time after the museum has closed; once, while speaking to me, he referred to the portrait with proprietary familiarity as "my woman." He has also

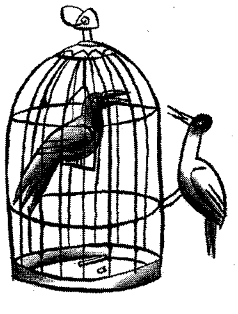
"We're going to have to start drafting people."

shown it off to visiting dignitaries: one day, the prime minister of Croatia; another, Prince Albert of Monaco, whom he first met when the Prince was ten years old, because their mothers knew each other. A week or so before the Hoffmann opening, the news had emerged that Steve Wynn, the casino mogul and art collector, had punctured a Picasso with his elbow, thus upending what Wynn said was its planned sale to the hedge-fund manager Steven Cohen, for a hundred and thirty-nine million dollars. Lauder could barely conceal his satisfaction at having his record for immoderation unbroken. "How do you even put your elbow through a painting, unless you have steel elbows?" he asked. (The next day, though, the newspapers reported that Lauder's record had been trumped: David Geffen, the Los Angeles mogul, had sold a Jackson Pollock to David Martinez, a Mexican collector, for a hundred and forty million dollars.)

At openings, Lauder typically stands at the door for the duration, greeting guests like a father of the bride in a receiving line. But this opening fell on the same day as a birthday party for his six-year-old grandson, and so at five-thirty he went to the limousine that was waiting for him outside. (It returned him to the museum an hour later.) Before getting in, Lauder opened the trunk: inside were an enormous toy lion, a giant Teddy bear, and a velvety puppy the size of a small cow, all still in F. A. O. Schwarz shopping bags, squeezed up against each other like victims of a plush-toy Mafia hit. In the realm of stuffed animals, Lauder's vaunted eye had failed him. "Which one do you think a boy would like best?" he said.

"I have three levels of collecting: 'Oh,' 'Oh My,' and 'Oh My God,' " Lauder told me one day, repeating a favorite formula. We were in his main office, a corner suite on the forty-second floor of the General Motors Building, on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-eighth and Fifty-ninth Streets; above a desk hung an Oh My God by the Austrian Expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, which Lauder had recently pried away from a private collection. "I have been after this painting for forty years, and finally I got it," he said. "I take my time." To Lauder's nostrum about the three categories of collecting, a modification has been made in recent years: "There is a fourth category, rarely used—'Oh My God, I Thought It Was in a Public Collection.' "

Lauder prides himself on buying only the best, and on doing so at any price, which are excellent principles to be in a position to observe. In 1997, he paid nearly fifty million dollars at a private sale for Cézanne's "Still Life, Flowered Curtain and Fruit," which was almost twenty million dollars more than the artist had previously commanded at auction. He owns the only Kandinsky "Composition" in private hands, the fifth in a series of ten monumental paintings, the first three of which were destroyed during the Second World War. Buying it reportedly set Lauder back about forty million dollars eight years ago.

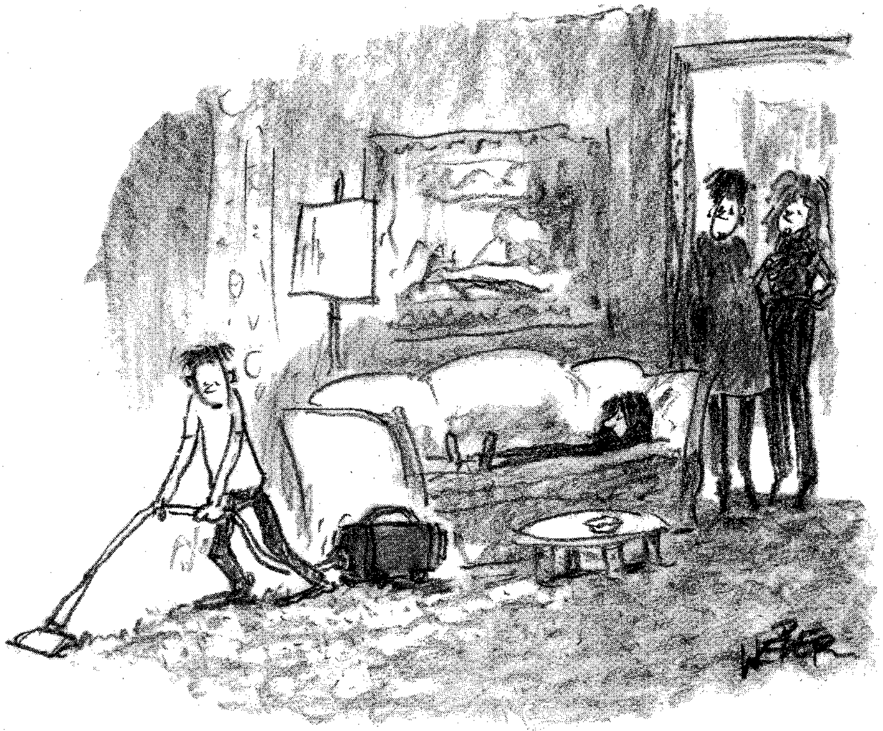


Lauder says that he has his eye on between ten and twenty Oh My Gods in other collections. He pages through auction-house catalogues at bedtime, and gathers intelligence from dealers and art-world cognoscenti. When he suspects that the owners of paintings he covets are ready to surrender them, he courts them with phone calls and visits. Some years ago, he decided that it was time to go after Matisse's "The Yellow Curtain." "I knew this painting my whole life," Lauder told me. "It was owned by a man called Marcel Mabille, who was living in Brussels. I heard one time that he was interested in selling, so I went to Brussels and we spoke about this picture. He said, 'It is not for sale. It will be buried with me.' I said, 'How do you feel, and when will that be?' "

Mabille did not appreciate Lauder's negotiating strategy, and held on to the painting; but a little later he sold it to a dealer, who then sold it to Lauder. It now hangs in MOMA, courtesy of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. (The Lauders, who married in 1967 and have two daughters, separated a little more than a year ago, though they remain united in perpetuity courtesy of the Ronald S. and Jo Carole Lauder Building, part of the museum's recent renovation.) Lauder not only lends MOMA works from his collection but has often acquired works for the museum, and its galleries are dotted with Oh My Gods. "I helped the museum get this," he said on a recent visit as we looked at a Klimt painting, "Hope II"; "I have a similar one to this," he said of Brancusi's "Blond Negress II"; "This is mine," he said, pointing to a Giacometti sculpture of a large, gnarled phallus, called "Disagreeable Object."

The catalogue of his possessions, which fills several shelves' worth of black ring binders, is overseen by Elizabeth Szancer Kujawski, his full-time curator of the past twenty-four years. (Kujawski used to do the same thing for Nelson Rockefeller. Explaining the difference between her two bosses, she said, "Nelson Rockefeller bought more in bulk; Mr. Lauder targets certain things.") Lauder's office is inside the Estée Lauder Companies headquarters—his suite is on one of six floors that the cosmetics company occupies in the General Motors Building—but not of it. Unlike the rest of Estée Lauder's corporate space, which is light and bright, with reproduction Louis Seize chairs and pale carpeting in the reception area, Lauder's suite, which was designed for him by the architect Charles Gwathmey, is sober and masculine, with dark-wood panelling and Art Deco furnishings, like a Mitteleuropean bank from the early twentieth century.

Actually, many of the objects in Lauder's office—cabinets, tables, lights, chairs, clock—do come from a Mitteleuropean bank dating from the early twentieth century: the Austrian Postal Savings Bank in Vienna, a landmark of early-modern architecture that was designed by Otto Wagner in 1906, and whose contents Lauder acquired from a dealer some years ago. The lights that Wagner designed—in aluminum, a significant innovation at the time—to illuminate Viennese banking tables now gleam above Lauder's desk. There are several Bauhaus telephones on the desk, all of which work, although in a concession to the requirements of his international business interests Lauder has a conventional phone as well. The carpet, gray with geometric patterns, is a reproduction of a design by Josef Hoffmann—"I have the original, but it would be ruined," he said—and the couch and two armchairs in which he has coffee



"Michael takes after me, while Nicole takes after her dad."

• •

with guests, or sits and goes through papers, were also designed by Hoffmann. (Occasionally, Lauder has the chairs switched, so that the one in the position he favors, with his back to the floor-to-ceiling windows, is not subjected to more wear than its twin, which looks out onto the Plaza Hotel.) Practicality is not Lauder's guiding decorative principle. In a lobby down the hall, his receptionist is obliged to sit at a Hoffmann desk with her knees swivelled to one side; her Aeron chair does not fit under it. The clock in the lobby, an Adolf Loos, runs slow, and a specialist comes once a week to wind it and all the other timepieces, among which a similar tendency to tardiness is common. When Lauder decided to display a huge Anselm Kiefer canvas in the lobby, he had to break through the ceiling in order to install it.

Ronald Lauder, too, is part of the Estée Lauder company but not of it. He is the chairman of Clinique Laboratories, one of the company brands, which he helped launch, in 1968, but he has no day-to-day responsibilities in that position. (He claims to use Clinique on his own skin to this day—"Look, no wrinkles," he says, pointing to the corrugations around his eyes.) Leonard Lauder, who is Ronald's older brother by eleven years, and is chairman of the board of the Estée Lauder Companies, explained to me that Ronald "works with the younger people in Clinique and helps teach them what they should know." One day, Lauder took me to a conference room in the Clinique department to meet some of these young people, among them his daughter Jane, who is the senior vice-president of marketing. (His other daughter, Aerin, is the senior vice-president of marketing and global creative directions at the Estée Lauder brand, upstairs.) The young people were screening a television commercial that was to air at breakfast time; it showed quick shots of various Clinique products, accompanied by Simon and Garfunkel singing "Feelin' groovy." Lauder watched it a couple of times, pronounced it "fabulous," and left the conference room singing a few bars of the tune.

It is hard to imagine Lauder feeling terribly groovy, given the formality of his mien, but his character is not without sybaritic inclinations. "I'm very much a hedonist," he told a reporter for the *Times* in 1973, at the age of twenty-nine, when he was the executive vice-president for Clinique. "I'm not for sitting here until 3 A.M., going over my figures." He recalled that, as marketing manager of the French launch of Estée Lauder, he had lived in Paris for six months: "I adored it. I looked on myself as a young playboy, I had a fantastic apartment on the Left Bank in the Seventh Arrondissement, and lived the life of Aly Khan." Richard Parsons, the C.E.O. of Time Warner, was Lauder's personal lawyer in the seventies and is now a close friend; he says that Lauder remains untortured by his considerable advantages. "He doesn't have any inhibitions about being wealthy and spending money," Parsons says. "Ronald is the exemplar of 'I am not going to die with all this cash if I can help it.'"

Lauder attended the Wharton School, in Philadelphia, where he met Jo Carole Knopf, who was studying art at Temple University. Jo Carole was, Lauder says, a promising artist, though she chose not to pursue that vocation; she now heads a foundation that commissions art works for American embassies. Lauder himself is a decent draftsman, and one day he showed me his party piece: he asked me to write my signature, then copied it so accurately that he could forge my checks, in the unlikely event he should need to. His daughter Aerin told me that his artistic powers are now used largely to entertain his two grandchildren: "You say to him, 'Draw Bugs Bunny,' and he can do it perfectly."

He was heavily involved in the family company for about a decade, but his hopes for professional fulfillment lay elsewhere. "'Idolized' is too strong a word for it, but he had great respect for the Nelson Rockefeller model of a private citizen who has given of himself to public service," Parsons, who had been Rockefeller's lawyer before he became Lauder's, says. In the early eighties, Lauder went into government, joining the Reagan Administration; his mother's friendship with Nancy Reagan was assumed by many to have been one of his main qualifications for his first post, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO Affairs. "I'll never forget coming in and meeting my staff," he once told an interviewer about his first day at the Pentagon. "Instead of having fifty or sixty women, I had fifty or sixty men, most of them in uniform."

At the Pentagon, he became friends

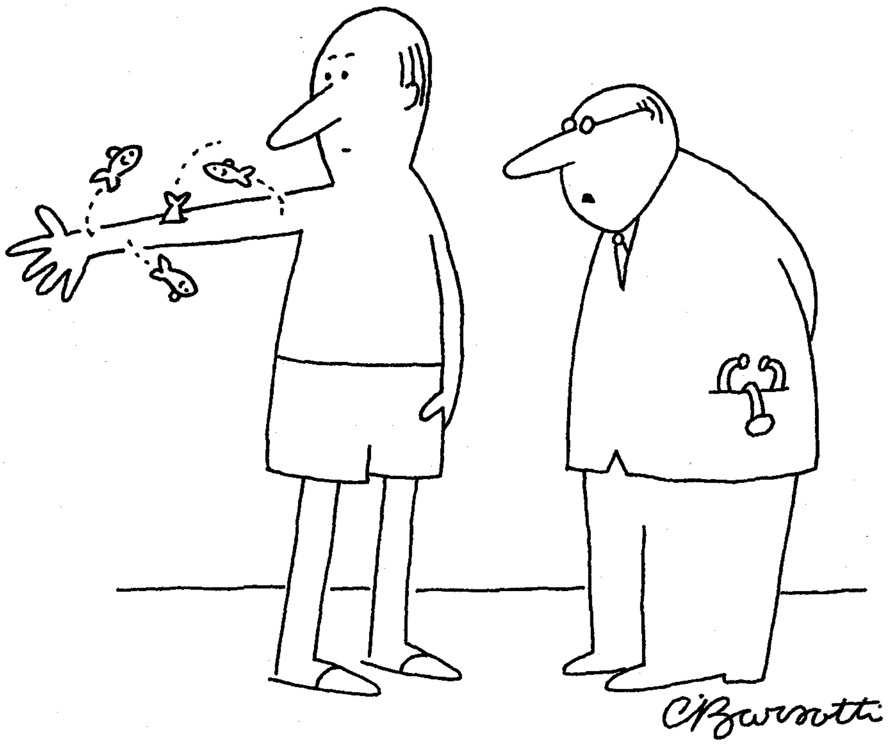
with Colin Powell, who at the time was a deputy to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and he and Powell travelled frequently in Europe. "He was very urbane and sophisticated with regard to restaurants and the like," Powell says. "We would always take Ron's lead in matters cultural and epicurean." Once, when Powell and Lauder were on assignment in Turkey, accompanied by their wives, the couples decided to go on a boat trip and Lauder was delegated to hire a suitable vessel. "We didn't know how many people would be able to fit on the boat," Powell recalls, explaining that various staffers were also interested in coming along. "We waited to see what would show up. It turned out that he had hired a car ferry."

In 1986, Lauder became the Ambassador to Austria, a job he had desired. (It had been suggested a couple of years earlier that Lauder might be nominated as the Ambassador to Jamaica, but Estée Lauder objected. "Who in Washington wants my Ronald dead?" she asked Roy Cohn at the time. "My friend Sarah Spencer-Churchill was raped in Jamaica! My Ronald is not going to a crazy country like Jamaica.") Lauder resigned eighteen months after assuming the Vienna post, following a difficult tenure during which Kurt Waldheim, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, was elected Austria's President, despite having been exposed as a Nazi officer. Lauder, who is Jewish, did not attend Waldheim's inauguration, and diplomatic relations worsened from there. (He did, however, get to take one memorable trip with Powell, who by this time was a corps commander stationed in Frankfurt, Germany. "I had access to a train belonging to the United States Army that if you were senior enough you could use to go to Berlin," Powell recalls. "It had a couple of upscale cars left over from the days of the Nazis. I invited Ron and Jo Carole and their daughters and we had a wonderful trip to Berlin.")

Lauder became prominent in the world of Viennese art and antiques: as a private individual he donated fifty thousand dollars for the re-gilding of the dome of the Secession Building, which had been neglected by the city for decades. Although his advocacy on behalf of Austrian art was appreciated, collectors of lesser means were alarmed by his resources and his resourcefulness. Ernst Ploil, an Austrian lawyer and collector who is now a friend of Lauder's, recalls encountering him in the city's galleries and antique shops, and told me that his first impressions of the Ambassador were less than ingratiating: "Beside him, there were always his bodyguards, who had quite an impressive largeness, and his arrival at an antique shop always meant that the other customers had to leave." After Lauder resigned, the Austrian government launched an investigation into his purchase of art works while in office; members of the right-wing Freedom Party alleged that he had circumvented strict regulations on the export of Austrian art. The inquiry, which appeared to be politically motivated, found nothing untoward. Renée Price, a friend for twenty-five years, as well as the Neue Galerie's director, said of Lauder's time in Vienna, "He went there with twelve Schiele watercolors, and he left with twelve Schiele watercolors."

After returning to New York, Lauder decided to run for mayor. He spent more than fourteen million dollars in the effort, but lost the Republican nomination to Rudolph Giuliani. He stayed in the race as the Conservative candidate, polling about nine thousand votes, at an approximate cost of fifteen hundred dollars per ballot. Aerin Lauder says that her father is still approached on the street by former supporters. "People come up and say, 'Oh, I wish that you had won,'" she told me, though it is hard to imagine when they would have the opportunity for sidewalk encounters: one day when Lauder and I were heading from his office to MOMA, six blocks away, he apologized for the absence of his limousine and suggested that we take a cab.

Lauder's political aspirations appear to have lapsed. "I think it is great for younger people to come in and take positions," he says. (Indeed, Kevin Warsh, Jane Lauder's husband, was recently appointed a governor of the Federal Reserve Board, the youngest ever.) His work life is now divided between business and philanthropy. He was among the first American businessmen to seek opportunities in the former Communist states after the fall of the Berlin Wall; one of his investments was Checkpoint Charlie. (He bought a total of four square blocks from forty owners, packaged them, and sold them to a developer.) In 1990, he travelled to the newly independent state of Estonia and bought a cement plant, which went on to provide most of the cement for new development in the region; he sold it after two profitable years. "It was a spectacular



"Arm fish—insurance won't cover that."

plant, except the cement business is not for me," he says. His most high-profile investment has been in a chain of television stations in Eastern Europe, which broadcast American programming as well as local news and entertainment. Lauder's holding was valued, last summer, at three hundred and eighty million dollars. (He just won his first International Emmy for his efforts.)

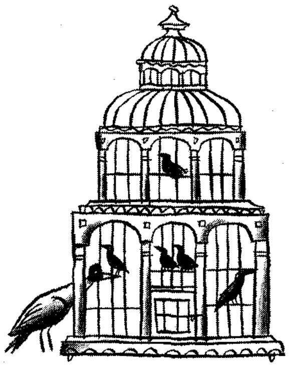
Eastern Europe is also the focus of his philanthropic endeavors: the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation has established schools for Jewish students in sixteen countries, with the long-term goal of reëstablishing a stable, prosperous European Jewry. He is educating ten thousand Jewish students throughout Germany, and also has schools in Warsaw, Berlin, Vienna, Minsk, Kiev, and beyond. Although Lauder had a bar mitzvah (he spent his money on art), he is the kind of Jew who has celebrated Christmas throughout his life, even once impersonating Santa when his children were small. Jewish issues, though, have become increasingly important to him in recent years. One day when Lauder was showing me around his offices, he opened the door to a small room, where a diminutive, elderly Hasidic rabbi was sitting, surrounded by books of Judaica. This was Chaskel Besser, a close friend of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, whom Lauder met while he was the Ambassador to Austria. Lauder describes Rabbi Besser as his spiritual adviser. "He does not sit down and pray, but inside he has these views that are religious," Rabbi Besser told me, though he admitted that he wasn't entirely at ease with the Lauder Christmas traditions.

Lauder has also taken an interest in Israeli politics and economic development, and is close to Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he got to know when Netanyahu was at the United Nations. "In 1998, I asked him to go on an exploratory mission to Damascus, and Hafez al-Assad broke up in the face of Ronald's New York wit," Netanyahu says. "He was able to create a rapport with a lot of self-deprecation and some Jackie Mason wise-guy jokes." (Lauder's comic diplomacy came to naught, as Syria and Israel were unable to agree on security terms.)

In Lauder's office is a framed photograph from a recent visit to Israel. The picture shows Lauder in the Negev Desert, surrounded by a crowd of young people; he is supporting a major irrigation project intended to supply water for new residential developments. "There were about five hundred kids moving to Israel from the United States and Canada, and all of a sudden they hand me a microphone and say, 'Let's sing some Hebrew songs, and Mr. Lauder will join us,'" Lauder told me. "The only Hebrew songs I really know are 'Happy Birthday' and 'Oseh Shalom.'" The youngsters around Lauder in the photo are wearing jeans and T-shirts; he is wearing a suit and tie. "When I'm in Israel, I always wear the same thing, a tie and jacket, because it sets me apart," he explained. "People want that."

One afternoon, Lauder took me to a town house, on Seventieth Street between Park and Madison Avenues, that his mother bought in the sixties, and in which she lived until her death, in 2004, at ninety-seven. Estée Lauder left an empire worth ten billion dollars, and part of Ronald's inheritance was this house, which he has added to a collection that includes residences in Florida, Paris, and London; an apartment at 740 Park Avenue; and a town house on East Fifty-second Street that was designed by Philip Johnson in 1950 as a guesthouse for Blanchette Rockefeller, who was later the president of MOMA, and which Lauder bought at auction in 2000 for eleven million dollars. There is also a country house in Wainscott, Long Island, on the grounds of which sits an eighteenth-century church that Lauder bought in Massachusetts and had moved to a more convenient spot.

Estée Lauder's house, which was built in 1929 for the financier Arthur Lehman, is baronial, with a large, dim, wood-panelled entry hall leading to a marble staircase. The place remains much as it was when she lived in it, with a Schiele painting hanging on a wall of the dining room and pictures of her with friends such as Betty Ford and Raisa Gorbachev arrayed in silver frames in a sitting room. One difference this morning, however, was the presence, in a ground-floor reception room, of two life-sized model horses—one in full armor and bearing an armored knight, the other with just half of its armor in place.



Lauder plans to use the house as a private museum, for dinners and functions, and as a place to display his collection of medieval arms and armor. (It is the largest such collection in private hands, and part of it is on loan to the Metropolitan Museum.) "I am bringing back some of my stuff from the Cloisters," he told me. "I have two great knights from an abbey in England—fourteenth or thirteenth century. It's fun. And I have two tombs of knights lying, from Germany. I don't know what I'm going to do with them. I could hang them on the wall, or put them outside in the garden."

Tom Zoufaly, Lauder's personal art installer, had been setting up the armored horses. "You don't think it cuts the room in half to do it like this?" Lauder asked, standing by one horse's metallic muzzle, as he cast an eye around the space. On the wall hung a painting of the Fountain of Youth by Albrecht Altdorfer, a German contemporary of Hieronymus Bosch; a tranquil wooden Madonna stood on a pedestal. Five chairs were lined up against the wall, as if awaiting a papal delegation. "What you need to do is take one of the chairs and put it on a platform," Lauder joked.

Zoufaly explained that a mirror on one wall would be coming down and a tapestry going up. "You have to decide what you want to do with the mirror," he told Lauder.

"Salvation Army," Lauder replied.

They walked over to an imposing fireplace. "Does it work?" Lauder asked a caretaker who was standing by. "Your mother had it capped off," the caretaker said. "She said it was drafty."

Estée Lauder was born in Corona, Queens, to a Czech shopkeeper and his Hungarian wife. In 1930, she married Joseph Lauter, a not particularly successful entrepreneur. (They changed the name to Lauder some years later.) She divorced

TRAIN

You there, in the middle of your mind,
curled up into a ball but wide awake—
I am awake like you, in the same bed

hearing the train that when it passes
means it's almost morning, though the sky
is dark, though the highway is quiet.

You can follow the train in your mind,
but your mind cannot follow the train
from little town to little town to Boston,

where in the dark the transactions happen—
something poured, something filled,
something dropped off, something taken—

happen among the loud men at the wharf
before their very first sign of dawn,
and the train in Boston turns around.

I wish our minds were like the train,
passing once a night through the woods,
fading out among the lights and termini,

its load of oil or metal going some place
they want it, returning in the morning,
its mile-long belly not empty, not hungry;

not the wharf, accepting train after train
of junk from the provinces all night,
a throat that tries and tries to swallow dirt.

—Dan Chiasson

him after nine years of marriage. "I did not know how to be Mrs. Joseph Lauder and Estée Lauder at the same time," she wrote in her autobiography. The couple reconciled three years after the divorce; Ronald was born fifteen months after his parents' second wedding. "We compromise," Joseph Lauder told friends, explaining the dynamic of their relationship. "I go where she goes. We always compromise like that."

While Estée Lauder liked to suggest, for marketing purposes, that she came from a cultured Viennese background, she was, like many first-generation immigrants, eager to assimilate. She was thus taken aback when her younger son, at about the age of twelve, began assuming the trappings and pretensions of a dandy of the Vienna of the twenties and thirties. "I was very much turned on by all the romantic ideas of what people looked like, how they dressed, and so on," he told me. He started wearing bespoke blue suits, and asked for a private tutor to give him lessons in French and German on alternating weeknights. (Lauder speaks those languages fluently, as well as a smattering of several others, including Swedish, which he studied as an undergraduate, and Dutch, which he acquired during his years as an Estée Lauder executive. "He probably speaks more languages with an American accent than anyone I know," an uncharitable colleague is quoted as saying in an unauthorized biography of his mother.) He studied the art of the period and read the literature. "I read Robert Musil's 'The Man Without Qualities,'" he told me. "No one else read it. The friends I had who were interested in literature were reading Marcel Proust."

Lauder went to Bronx High School of Science; he asked his parents if he could transfer there from the Barnard School for Boys, in Riverdale, which he found insufficiently rigorous. ("I am the only person I know of who took himself out of private school and went to public school," he says.) While he was enrolled at Bronx Science, he spent a semester at the Lycée Carnot, in Cannes—"I was also the only Bronx Science student ever to take part of my junior year abroad"—where he became friends with Peter Kurtz, the son of an Austrian restaurateur. Kurtz was three years Lauder's senior, and during subsequent summers they made several road trips through Eastern Europe. Kurtz, who later became the head of Estée Lauder's operations in Central Europe, recalled, "We went to Prague and to Budapest and to Zagreb and to Belgrade in my convertible Volkswagen, with two flags mounted on it: one the American flag and one the Austrian." They travelled according to Kurtz's limited budget, and conditions were more primitive than Lauder was accustomed to. "We were boarding in private homes," Kurtz said. "Often, we shared a double bed, because it was much cheaper than two single beds. The bathroom was a fountain in the yard, and we had to wash ourselves in the fresh air with cold water. For me this was natural, but for Ronald this was not so easy." Estée Lauder was very nervous about Ronald's adventures behind the Iron Curtain, according to Kurtz: "Ronald had to call her daily in order to prove that he was still alive, and sometimes we had to wait hours in the Eastern European post offices to get a telephone line to New York." But Lauder was eager for new experiences. "We ate the food that I found in supermarkets, and while I was driving Ronald had to peel the oranges," Kurtz recalled. "He had never peeled oranges before, so I had to teach him how to peel."

Lauder made his first trip to Vienna as a teen-ager. "I stayed in the Bristol Hotel, quite near the Opera, on the Ringstrasse," he told me. "I arrived one evening, and I remember walking the next morning to the Belvedere. I felt like a twenty-five-year-old instead of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old. I got there incredibly early, before it opened, and I sat there and waited, and when they opened there was no one in the building other than me and the guards. I saw the Klimts and the Schieles, and I spent hours." (The Neue Galerie, as it happens, does not admit unaccompanied children under the age of sixteen; no one under the age of twelve is allowed in at all, with the occasional exception of the Lauder grandchildren outside of regular hours. This, Lauder explains, is owing to the erotic nature of some of the art—of his own adolescent epiphany at the Belvedere, he noted, "At that time, there were no Klimt and Schiele watercolors of people masturbating on display"—and because he wants to be able to show off his Hoffmann recliners and cabinets without fear of them being touched by small, grubby hands.)

On that trip, Lauder bought his first Austrian Expressionist works, a drawing by Schiele and one by Klimt. "I just loved the idea of being an art collector," he says. Lauder's friend Lally Weymouth, the daughter of the publisher Katharine Graham, recalls that when he took her through the Neue Galerie shortly after it opened many of the paintings he showed her were ones he had owned since his youth: "He would say, 'I bought this when I was fifteen; I bought this when I was sixteen.' It was really fun." As a teenager, Lauder would badger his brother, Leonard, who also became a serious collector of art, to get involved. "He and I went to an auction at the old Parke-Bernet Galleries on Madison Avenue, before they were Sotheby's, and they were auctioning Lautrec posters," Leonard told me. "I would only go to a certain limit, and he kept on giving me the elbow, which meant, 'Go higher, you fool, don't you know these are bargains?'" When Ronald was sixteen, a dealer offered him the opportunity to buy a drawing by van Gogh and one by Lyonel Feininger for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Lauder put on his suit and tie, went to the family's bank, and borrowed the money against Estée Lauder stock. "It was very easy—they gave me the money, and I took it and bought the two pieces of art," he told me. "The banker called two weeks later and said, 'Mr. Lauder, we just had to go through your notes and we saw that you put down as your date of birth 1944. You mean 1934, don't you?' I said, 'No, I mean 1944.' He said, 'We can't lend money to a sixteen-year-old.' I said, 'I can't give it back to you. I can give you a van Gogh.' Then I had to have my father come down and sign for me." Today, the drawing, of the postman of Moulin, is worth about six or eight million dollars. Not long after he acquired it, Lauder began buying art for his parents as well as for himself. (The Schiele on the dining-room wall of his mother's house was bought at his urging.)

"I would buy all these big catalogues raisonnés," he says. "People weren't really collecting German art. This was right after World War Two, and the big prices were for Monet and Manet. Most of the German art was brought here by people fleeing Nazi Europe, coming here with whatever they could bring with them." Some of his best purchases were bought off the walls of apartments on the Upper West Side. "I would go through every book, page by page, and my favorite two words in the book were 'private collection,'" he says.

A crucial figure in Lauder's art education was Serge Sabarsky, a dealer and collector who became, by Leonard Lauder's account, "a father figure to Ronald." Sabarsky was a refugee from Austria—he had been a member of a circus troupe—who, by the late nineteen-sixties, had established a gallery of Austrian and German art on Madison Avenue, catering to a small but devoted clientele. When Lauder went to his first exhibition there, he asked Sabarsky if he knew any American collectors of Klimt or Schiele.

"I know of two," Sabarsky said.

"There's also me and my brother," Lauder said.

"I already counted both of you," Sabarsky said.

Lauder and Sabarsky struck up a close friendship, with daily phone calls and weekly meetings. Aerin Lauder told me, "When I was about six or seven years old, he used to take me to Serge Sabarsky's on the weekend to look at the Schieles. I am sure he told my mother he was taking me to the park."

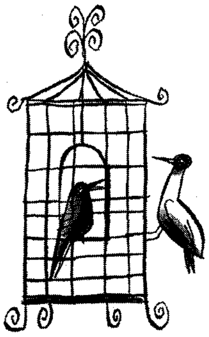
For years, the men talked about establishing a museum dedicated to their shared interest, and in the early nineties Lauder bought the mansion at Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street, from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, for nine million dollars. Sabarsky died in 1996, but Lauder continued with the project, and by the time the museum opened, in 2001, he had spent eleven million dollars more on its renovation. This included turning Mrs. Vanderbilt's wood-panelled library into a specialty bookshop and installing a Josef Hoffmann chandelier in the museum's Café Sabarsky—a replica of a Viennese coffeehouse, with Sacher Torte and spaetzle on the menu, its authenticity compromised only by fierce air-conditioning and a ban on smoking.

"Everybody's a critic!"

Kirk Varnedoe, in an introduction to the catalogue of MOMA's "Vienna 1900" exhibit, which took place in 1986 and was largely underwritten by Lauder, remarked upon the romantic light in which Vienna is often retrospectively cast. "Klimt and Wagner and Loos thus become tablemates of Freud and Mahler and Wittgenstein at an imaginary coffeehouse for a shining moment in the city that was 'the cradle of modernity,'" Varnedoe wrote. "The deeper collaboration here thus may be between our unfulfilled longings and those of the Viennese artists we study." Café Sabarsky could be the stage set for that imaginary kaffeeklatsch. With his museum, and with his purchases of art, Lauder has managed to insert himself into that fleeting, dangerous period in history, transposing it to the more congenial surroundings of the Upper East Side; he has given himself the grand, cultured Viennese heritage to which Estée Lauder pretended. He has even managed to make the enactment of his fantasy tax deductible, an accomplishment that might have impressed Dr. Freud himself.

Lauder likes to compare contemporary New York City with fin-de-siècle Vienna. "It had the same kind of energy, passion, life," he says. "I always say that, had Adele Bloch-Bauer been alive today, she would be living in New York. One of the great things about New York and about Vienna at that time was that people mixed: it wasn't 'This person was Jewish, and this person wasn't.' And New York is a meritocracy, although some people have money and some do not." Lauder's view of New York City is a rarefied one—if Egon Schiele were living in New York today, he'd be looking at his studio rent and considering a move to Philadelphia—and his view of Vienna before the Second World War is similarly rosy. "It was a place filled with culture, filled with things happening," Lauder told me. "It was not really until '36 or '37, and with the Anschluss, that you really started to have problems. Now, granted, you had the Depression, but, from what I understand, Vienna from the turn of the century right until 1938 was a fabulous place."

Had he lived there at that time, Lauder says, he might have enjoyed a life even more rewarding than the one permitted him as a Lauder in New York. "I picture myself a little bit like Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer," he told me. "I would have been very involved in the arts, and been very interested in making changes. I think I would probably have been more politically active." He imagines that he might even have had a role in averting the devastating course that history took after Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts declined to accept one aspiring student who was moved to join the city's artistic ferment: Adolf Hitler. "I wish the academy had taken him," Lauder said. "I would have paid for his tuition."



After Lauder bought the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, the four other Klimts that had been returned to Maria Altmann and her family were consigned to Christie's for auction. On a rainy evening in early November, they were sold—in what turned out to be the house's biggest night ever—for a combined total of a hundred and ninety-three million dollars, fifty million dollars more than had been estimated. There had been speculation that Lauder might purchase another one of the pictures for the Neue Galerie, perhaps "Adele Bloch-Bauer II," which was painted five years after the golden portrait and shows a haughtier, wearier-looking Adele against a vividly colored background. Instead, Lauder acquired, for thirty-eight million dollars—in collaboration with an unnamed private collector—a Berlin street scene by Ernst Kirchner, which, only months earlier, had been taken off a wall of the Brücke Museum, in Berlin; a German court had determined that its previous owners, Alfred and Thekla Hess, had sold it under duress during the Nazi occupation, and had ordered it returned to their descendants.

Most of the auction's attendees left for dinner as soon as the gavel went down on the last of the Klimts, like sports fans leaving a game where the winner is clear long before the final whistle blows. Lauder, though, was on the premises well after the sale was over, lingering in the almost deserted lobby in his pin-striped suit, while representatives of the world's press were packed into a nearby gallery, being addressed by Christie's elated staff.

Lauder said that he wasn't disappointed to see the Klimts go elsewhere. "I still have eight Klimts, and I feel very happy," he told me. "The reason I didn't buy any of these is I would have had to take one of the other Klimts off the wall to put it up." The purchase of the Kirchner was a coup, he added. "It fills a major hole at the Neue Galerie. It is the most important Kirchner in private hands. It was one of my Oh My Gods—it was an Oh My God, I Thought It Was in a Museum."

Two men crossed the lobby to greet Lauder: Steven Thomas, an attorney, who negotiated the sale of the Klimts, and Randol Schoenberg, an attorney who had represented Maria Altmann and her family. Thomas, who is tall and tan, was composed and satisfied-looking. Schoenberg, who is a generation younger than Lauder and several inches shorter, appeared dazed. (It has been reported that he was due to split forty per cent of the proceeds from the paintings with a Viennese lawyer; Schoenberg will not comment on the arrangement.)

"It was a tremendous validation of everything," Schoenberg, who seemed barely able to contain his exhilaration, said. "It felt like the audience really felt the story behind the paintings, that people weren't just bidding on the art. It felt like a tremendous validation of what we had done. And it's great for Klimt, which is good for all of us."

Lauder nodded paternalistically.

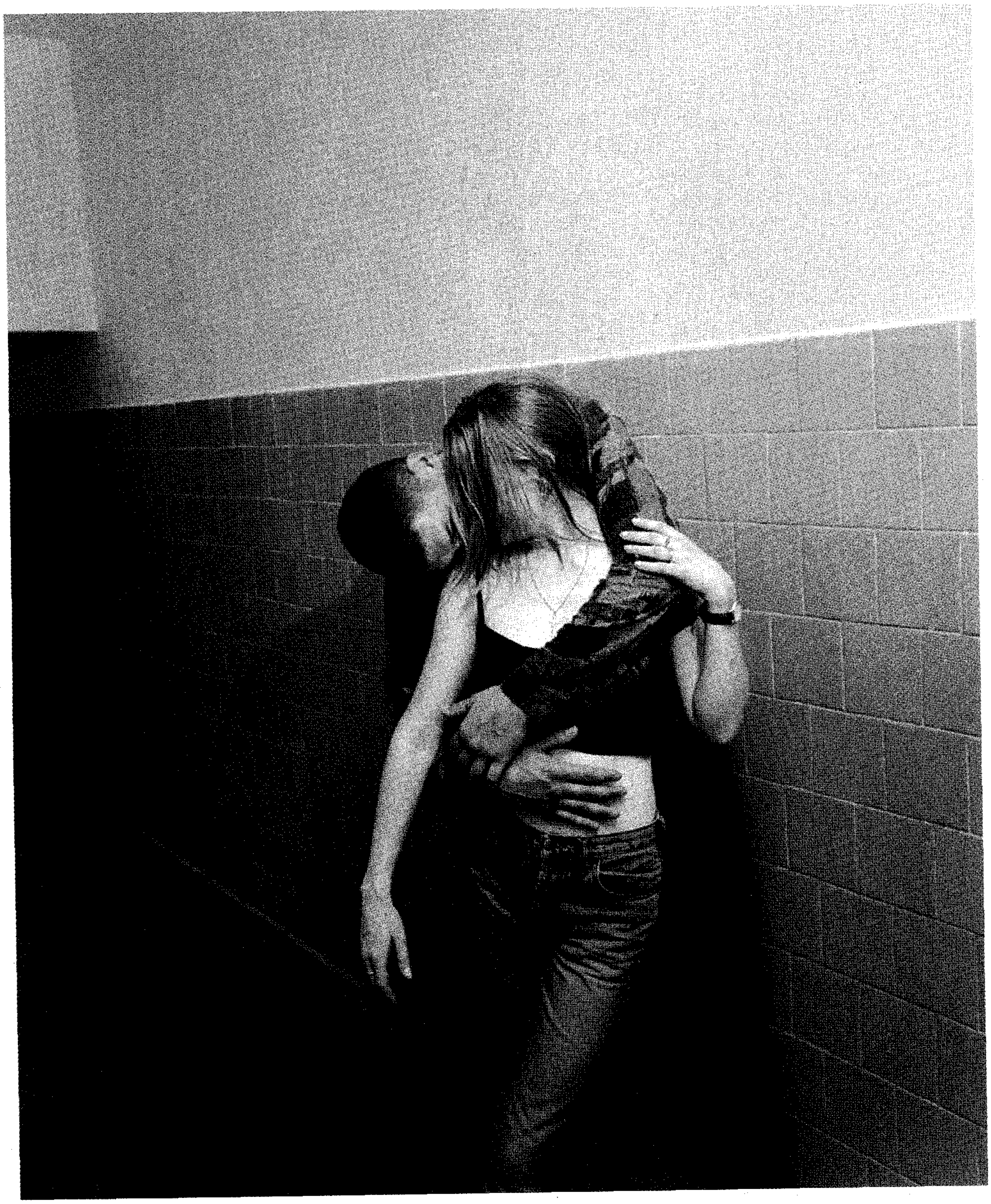
"Did you see the *Financial Times* this weekend, where you are credited with changing the whole paradigm of art history?" Schoenberg asked. Lauder gave an inquiring look, and said that he had not. Schoenberg went on, "It said that people who used to think that art went from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism are discovering, thanks to Ronald Lauder's purchase of 'Adele,' that there's art in Austria." Lauder rocked back on his heels very slightly and raised his arms at the elbow, in a mild gesture of delight.

Steven Thomas grinned. "I told you about that when I talked with you yesterday," he said. Lauder gave a hesitant smile in return, looking about as pleased with himself as a man who prefers not to show how pleased he is with himself can look. ♦

FICTION

BRAVADO

BY WILLIAM TREVOR



The leaves had begun to fall. All along Sunderland Avenue on the pavement beneath the beech trees there was a sprinkling, not yet the mushy inconvenience they would become when more fell and rain came, which inevitably would be soon. Not many people were about; it was after midnight, almost one o'clock, the widely spaced lampposts casting pools of misty, yellow illumination. A man walked his dog in Blenning Road in the same blotchy lamplight, the first of autumn's leaves gathering there also. An upstairs window opened in Verdun Crescent, hands clapped to dismiss a cat rooting in a flower bed. A car turned into Sunderland Avenue, its headlights dimmed and then extinguished, its alarm set for the night with a flurry of flashing orange and red. The traffic of the city was a hum that only faintly reached these leisurely streets, the occasional distant shriek of a police siren or an ambulance more urgently disturbing their peace.

Less than half a mile away, the night was different. Young people prowled about outside the Star night club, its band—Big City—taking a break. A late shop was still open, a watchful Indian at the door noting who came and went. A few cars drew away, but more remained. Then, with a thump of such suddenness that for a moment it might have been taken for a warning of emergency or disaster, music again burst from the Star night club.

By half past one this neighborhood, too, had quietened. The bouncers at the Star drove off, couples made their way to the dark seclusion of the nearby canal bank. Others stood about, groups forming and dispersing. Locking up his shop, the Indian was argued with, and abused, when demands for alcohol and potato crisps were refused. The last of the parked cars were driven off.

Two youths who were friends went together, undaunted by the prospect of an hour's walk to where they lived. One was in shirtsleeves although it was chilly, the arms of a red anorak tied around his shoulders; the other wore a black woollen jersey above ragged jeans. They talked about the girls they had come across on the dance floor, one in particular, well known to them both, the others strangers. They talked about their intentions for the future: in the Merchant Navy and in car sales, an uncle's business. These were the changes that were soon to come about, when education ended, when so much they had known for so long was to be left behind forever: the Brothers and the lay teachers, the cramped desks scratched with entwined initials and hearts and arrows, all they had learned of self-preservation and of survival's cunning. There was, in their conversation, an absence of regret.

They paused in their walk while the anorak was unknotted and put on and zipped. Their evening out had been a good one, they agreed while this was being done. "Kicking," one said. "Big City can do it." They walked on, talking about that band's touch of genius.

With his mobile telephone close to his mouth, the Indian loudly demanded the police: his usual ploy at this hour, speaking to no one. His tormentors swore at him, then tired of their invective and went away. Five there were, two of them girls, neither of whom had taken part in the abuse, which had surprised him, for girls were often the worst. He kept an eye on the five when they moved off in a bunch, causing an oncoming car to slow to a crawl as they crossed the street. Then he locked his shop, thankful that there hadn't been an incident.

"How ya doin'?" Manning shouted at the driver of the car. He drummed on the bonnet with his fists and, joining in, his companions—but not the girls—did the same. The car kept moving, then stopped and reversed. It went another way.

"Could you beat that?" Manning laughed, watching the car from the middle of the road. He was tallest of the bunch, his reddish hair falling over his forehead in a floppy shock that he was said to be proud of. An air of insouciance distinguished his manner, was there again in the lazy saunter of his walk, in his smile. Manning led when he was with Donovan and Kilroy, which he was most of the time, and was tonight. Aisling was his girl, fair-haired and pretty, with expressive blue eyes, younger than Manning by more than a year. The second girl wasn't known to the others; earlier she had asked which way they were going and then if she could go with them, because she lived in that direction. Francie she was called.

Aisling clung to Manning as they walked. With his arm round Francie, Kilroy tried to slow her down, in the hope of setting up an opportunity for something when they had fallen far enough behind. But Francie kept up a steady pace. She was small, often called a little thing, but deliberate and determined in her manner. She, too, was pretty, but less dramatically so than Aisling, whom Manning liked to describe as drop-dead gorgeous. She denied that she was, but Manning's regular repetition of the compliment did not displease her.

She listened to him now, saying he didn't intend to set foot in the Star again, objecting to the way the shaven-headed bouncers had frisked him for miniatures. They had taken one from him and afterward said they hadn't: they thought they owned you, louts like that. "Did you ever do a line, cowboy?" he called across Aisling to Donovan.

"Amn't I doing a line with Josie Flynn?"

"You eejit!"

Laughing again, Manning sounded drunk, Aisling thought. Not very, but a little. She'd been drunk once or twice herself but hadn't liked it, everything slipping about, and the way you felt in the morning.

"Did you ever, though?" Manning pressed, offering Donovan a cigarette.

Donovan said he had of course, many a time, and Aisling knew all this was for her and for the girl who'd tagged along, whose name she had forgotten. "Awesome," Donovan said, he and Manning lighting their cigarettes, sharing the match. No one else was a smoker.

They were going by the dye works now, where Manning had once climbed over the high spiked railings. That had been for Aisling, too, and a girl called Maura Bannerman. The security lights had been triggered and through the railings they had watched Manning roaming about, from time to time peering in at the downstairs windows of the lumpy red brick building that was said to have been a lunatic asylum once.

Behind her Aisling heard Kilroy telling the girl he had monopolized about that night. At the top of the railings, razor wire was woven through the spikes, he said, adding to the hazards: none of them knew how Manning had

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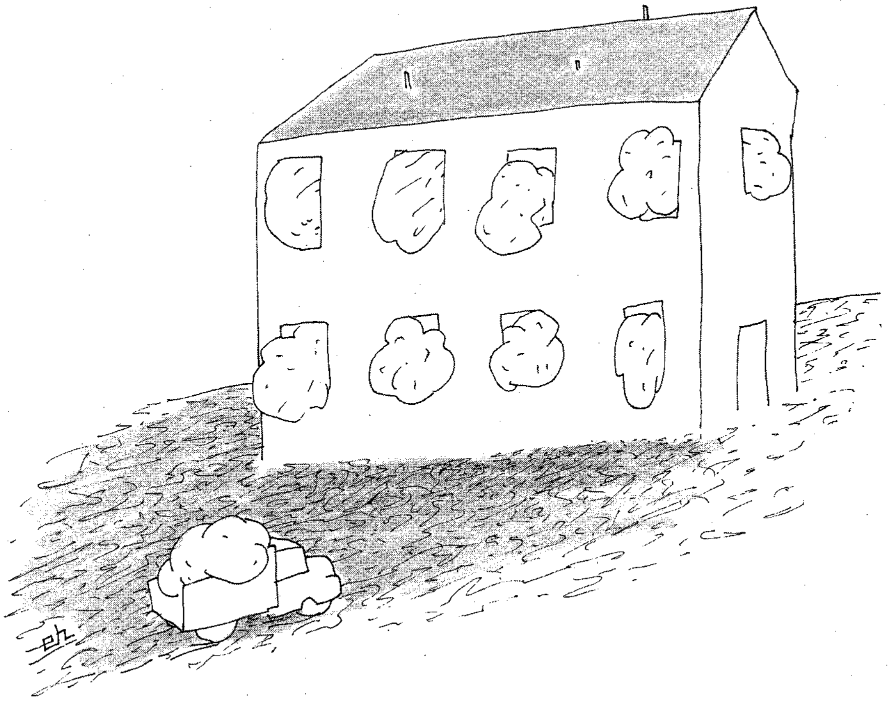

The Abandoned Dreams Depot.

done it, especially since he was a bit drunk then, too.

Kilroy had slit eyes that aptly suggested an untrustworthy nature. Donovan was considered to be dense. Almost as tall as Manning, he was bulkier, clumsy in his movements, slow of speech. Kilroy had a stunted appearance, accentuated by oiled black hair sleekly brushed straight back, making the top of his head seem flat. Aisling didn't much like either of them.

The first time she'd been in the Star—the first time she'd seen Manning, no more than a face in the crowd—she had admired him. He'd noticed her interest, he told her afterward, he said she was his kind, and she didn't hesitate when he asked her to go out with him. Mano he was called, in the Dublin manner. Martin was what his family called him and Aisling thought of him as that when she was in her convent classroom, and every night before she went to sleep. She and he were an item, he said, which Aisling had never been with anyone before.

"I'd give a thousand bucks for a snort," he was saying now, his voice slightly raised, a laugh in it again. "Where'd we get ourselves a snort, cowboy?"

Donovan said maybe Dirty Doyle's, Kilroy suggested Capel Street. It was a kind of play, Aisling knew; Martin Manning doing the big fellow, her father would have said. She had become used to it ages ago.

They reached the quiet streets, St. Stephen's Church at the corner of Goodchild Street, the shadowy sprawl of trees on either side of Sunderland Avenue ahead of them.

"Who're those geeks?" Donovan suddenly exclaimed, and they all stopped, not knowing at first where to look. When he pointed they saw the red anorak.

"It's bloody Dalgety," Manning said.

The two parted in Sunderland Avenue, Dalgety turning into Blenning Road. On his own, he went a little faster, but paused when he noticed that one of the garden gates he was passing was invitingly open. He went through it and crossed a lawn to a corner near the house where he couldn't be seen from the windows. He urinated in the shadow of an eleagnus bush.

Making their way from the night club, they had once or twice been aware of voices behind them but, engrossed in conversation themselves, hadn't looked round to see whose they were. Dalgety couldn't hear the voices now and imagined that whoever they belonged to had gone in some other direction. A light hadn't come on in the house, which sometimes happened when you found a garden that was convenient for the purpose he had used it for. He unzipped his anorak because he'd noticed that the teeth of the zip hadn't been properly aligned. While he was zipping it up again he was struck, a blow on the right side of his head. He thought that someone had come out of the house, and was thinking he hadn't heard the front door opening when the next blow came. He stumbled and fell, and a foot smashed into his jaw when he was lying on the grass. He tried to stand up but couldn't.

Aisling watched from the road. Francie looked away. In the garden, standing back at first, not taking part, Donovan moved forward when the boy was lying on the grass. Kilroy stayed with the girl. Nobody spoke while the assault was taking place, not in the garden, not on the road.

Aisling wondered what the boy had done, what insults had been exchanged in the Star or before that, how he had offended. Something of the headiness of the night club seemed to be there again, something of the music's energy, of the wildness that was often in a face as it went by on the dance floor before it was sucked into the suffocating closeness of the crowd. Still nobody spoke when they all moved on, in a bunch again.

"Oh, leave me be!" Francie suddenly cried out. "Just leave me, would you!"

She pulled herself away from Kilroy's grasp, fiercely taking exception to the attentions she had allowed before. "Lay off of me, will you."

"Behave yourself, cowboy." Manning's rebuke came lightly, and for a moment as he spoke Aisling saw the white gleam of his teeth. He knew how best to intercede. He was good at that. She'd often noticed how in an instant he became serious when seriousness was called for.

And she'd noticed how he didn't hesitate to do what he felt should be done. There would be a reason for what had happened.

Kilroy muttered. He desisted for a few minutes before he tried again, and again was crossly rejected. In Charleston Road Francie scuttled off, not saying good night.

"Hoity!" Kilroy remarked.

Aisling didn't think so. The girl who'd asked if she might walk with them had been upset, taken by surprise when so suddenly the incident occurred. Knowing too little about the strangers she'd fallen in with, she hadn't been able to make allowances, or sense that there would be a reason. Being pawed about by Kilroy might even have seemed too like the violence in the garden—you couldn't blame her if she'd felt frightened. Aisling would have herself.

"Dalgety's a pain," Manning said when she asked why Dalgety had been duffed up.

"Forget it," he said.

"I never heard that name before," Aisling said. "Dalgety."

"Yeah, a nerd's."

Conversation lapsed then, but as they passed the entrance to the Greenbanks Hotel Donovan began on a story about his sister, how she was going to a shrink and hated it so much she often didn't turn up for her weekly sessions.

"A guy comes on heavy," Donovan said. "You end up with a shrink."

Nobody commented; Donovan did not go on. The interrupted silence held for a little longer and the talk, when it began again, was different. So that was it, Aisling reflected, not saying anything herself. She felt relieved, aware of a relaxation in her body, as if her nerves had been strung up and no longer were. This Dalgety had upset Donovan's sister, going too far when she didn't want him to, his persistence putting her in need of psychiatric care. And the anger Aisling had witnessed in the garden touched her, what had happened seeming different, less than it had been while she watched.

"See you, Mano," Donovan said. "Cheers, Aisling."

She said good night. Donovan turned into Cambridge Road, and soon afterward Kilroy turned off, too.

"Was he all right?" Aisling asked then.

"Who's this?"

"Dalgety."

"Christ, of course he was."

They went to Spire View Lane, where they always went when it was as late as this. "You're a dazzler tonight," Manning whispered, slipping his hands beneath her clothes.

She closed her eyes, kissing him back, his early-morning stubble harsh on her chin. The first time she had experienced that roughness it had excited her, and every time since it had.

"I'd best be getting back," she said, not that she wanted to get back anywhere.

A dog came sniffing at them, some kind of small breed, black or gray, you couldn't tell in the dark. Someone whistled for it and it ran off.

"I'll walk you over," Manning said, which he always did when she had to go. He lit a cigarette, as he always did, too. The smoke would get into her clothes and she'd be asked about it if there was anyone up, although usually nobody was.

"I looked back," Manning said. "He was up on his feet."

"Bernadette rang," a note for her in the kitchen said, "and Sister Teresa about knowing your part for Thursday."

No one was still up or there wouldn't be the note. Aisling made cocoa and had biscuits with it, sitting at the table with the *Evening Herald,* then pushing it away. She wished it hadn't happened, but thought about Hazel Donovan and before she finished her cocoa wondered if she really wished it.

She might have slipped him but she hadn't, and she remembered now not wanting to. "The hard man," his friends said when they greeted him, knowing him well, as she did, too, his daring, the way he took chances. "Aw, come on," he had urged, the time he gave her a lift on the bar of his bicycle, when they were caught by her father coming toward them on a bicycle, too, his veterinary bag hanging on the handlebars. "Don't ever let me see the like of that again," her father stormed at her when she returned to the house. Being his favorite made being caught all the worse, her mother explained. Neither of them approved of Martin Manning. They didn't understand.

She washed the mug she'd drunk her cocoa from at the sink and put the lid on the biscuit tin. She picked up Sister Teresa's typed sheets and went upstairs. "Scenes from Hamlet" was Sister Teresa's title for the monologues she had put together, the first time she had at-

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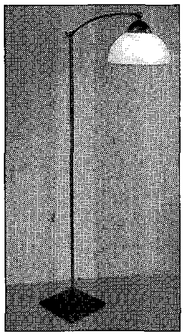

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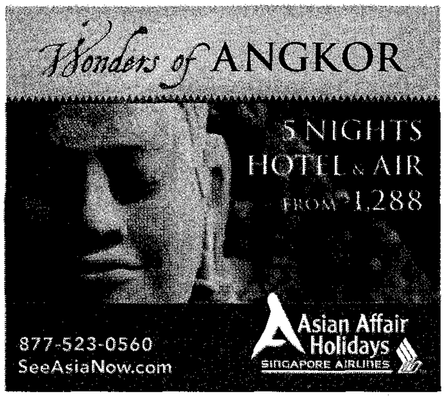

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tempted something that wasn't a conventional play. " 'There's fennel for you,' " Aisling murmured, half asleep already, " 'and columbines . . .' "

At No. 6 Blenning Road, the elderly woman who had lived alone there since she was widowed seven months earlier was roused from a dream in which she was a child again. She went to the top of her stairs, leaned over the bannister, and shouted in the direction of the hall door, asking who was there. But all that happened was the ringing of the doorbell again. It would take more than that, she told herself, to get her to open her door at this hour.

When the bell ceased there was a banging and a rapping, and a voice coming from far away because she hadn't had time to put her hearing aid in. Even when the letter box rattled and the voice was louder she still couldn't hear a word of what was said. She went back to her bedroom for her hearing aid and then trudged down to the hall.

"What d'you want?" she shouted at the letter box.

Fingers appeared, pressing the flap open.

"Excuse me, missus. Excuse me, but there's someone lying down in your garden."

"It's half past six in the morning."

"Could you phone up the guards, missus?"

In the hall she shook her head, not answering that. She asked whereabouts in her garden the person was.

"Just lying there on the grass. I'd call them up myself only my mobile's run out."

She telephoned. No point in not, she thought. She was glad to be leaving this house, which for so long had been too big for two and was now ridiculously big for one. She had been glad before this, but now was more certain than ever that she had made the right decision. She thought so again while she watched from her dining-room window a garda car arriving, and an ambulance soon after that. She opened her hall door then, and saw a body taken away. A man came to speak to her, saying it was he who had talked to her through the letter box. A guard told her the person they had found lying near her eleagnus was dead.

On the news the address was not revealed. A front garden, it was reported, and gave the district. A milkman going by on his way to the depot had noticed. No more than that.

When Aisling came down at five past eight they were talking about it in the kitchen. She knew at once.

"You all right?" her mother asked, and she said she was. She went back to her bedroom, saying she had forgotten something.

It was all there on the front page of the *Evening Herald's* early-afternoon edition. No charges had been laid, but it was expected that they would be later in the day. The deceased had not been known to the householder in whose garden the body had been discovered, who was reported as saying she had not been roused by anything unusual in the night. The identity of the deceased had not yet been established, but a few details were given, little more than that a boy of about sixteen had met his death following an assault. Witnesses were asked to come forward.

Aisling didn't; the girl who had tagged along did. The victim's companion on the walk from the Star night club gave the time they left it and the approximate time of their parting from one another. The night-club bouncers were helpful but could add little to what was already known. The girl who had come forward was detained for several hours at the Garda station from which inquiries were being made. She was complimented on the clarity of her evidence and pressed to recall the names of the four people she had been with. But she had never known those names, only that the red-haired boy was called Mano and had himself addressed his two companions as "cowboy." Arrests were made just before midnight.

Aisling read all that the next morning in the *Irish Independent*, which was the newspaper that came to the house. Later in the day she read an almost identical account in the *Irish Times*, which she bought in a newsagent's where she wasn't known. Both reports referred to her, describing her as "the second girl," whom the Gardaí were keen to locate. There was a photograph, a coat thrown over the head and shoulders of a figure being led away, a wrist handcuffed to that of a uniformed garda. The second arrest, at a house in Ranelagh, told no more. No names were released at first.

When they were, Aisling made a statement to the police, confessing that she was the second girl, and in doing so she became part of what had happened. People didn't attempt to talk to her about it, and at the convent it was forbidden that they should do so; but it was sometimes difficult, even for strangers, to constrain the curiosity that too often was evident in their features.

When more time passed, there was the trial, and then the verdict. Acquitted of murder, the two who had been apprehended were sent to jail for eleven years, their previous good conduct taken into account, together with the consideration, undenied by the court, that there was an accidental element in what had befallen them: neither had known of their victim's frail, imperfect heart.

Aisling's father did not repeat his castigation of her for making a friendship he had never liked: what had happened was too terrible for petty blame. Beneath an intolerant surface, he could draw on gentleness. "We have to live with this," he said, as if accepting that the violence of the incident reached out for him, too, that guilt was indiscriminately scattered.

For Aisling, time passing was stranger than she had ever known days and nights to be before. Nothing was unaffected. In conveying the poetry of Shakespeare on the hastily assembled convent stage she perfectly knew her lines, and the audience was kind. But there was pity in that applause, because she had unfairly suffered in the aftermath of the tragedy she had witnessed. She knew there was, and in the depths of her consciousness it felt like mockery and she did not know why.

A letter came, long afterward, flamboyant handwriting bringing back the excitement of surreptitious notes in the past. No claim was made on her, nor were there protestations of devotion, as once, so often, there had been. He would go away. He would bother no one. He was a different person now. A priest was being helpful.

The letter was long enough for contrition, but still was short. Missing from its single page was what had been missing, also, during the trial: that the victim had been a nuisance to Donovan's sister. In the newspaper photograph—the same one many times—Dalgety was dark-haired, smiling only slightly, his features regular, almost nondescript except for a mole on his chin. And, seeing it so often, Aisling had each time imagined his unwanted advances pressed on Hazel Donovan, and had read the innocence in those features as a lie. It was extraordinary that this, as the reason for the assault, had not been brought forward in the court; and more extraordinary that it wasn't touched upon in a letter where, with remorse and regret, it surely belonged. "A guy comes on heavy," Donovan, that night, had said.

There had been a lingering silence and he broke it to mention this trouble in his family, as if he thought that someone should say something. The conversational tone of his voice seemed to indicate he would go on, but he didn't. Hungry for mercy, she too eagerly wove into his clumsy effort at distraction an identity he had not supplied, allowing it to be the truth, until time wore the deception out.

After the convent, Aisling acquired a qualification that led to a post in the general office of educational publishers. She had come to like being alone and often in the evenings went on her own to the cinema, and at weekends walked at Howth or by the sea at Dalkey. One afternoon she visited the grave, then went back often. A stone had been put there, its freshly incised words brief: the name, the dates. People came and went among the graves but did not come to this one, although flowers were left from time to time.

In a bleak cemetery Aisling begged forgiveness of the dead for the falsity she had embraced when what there was had been too ugly to accept. Silent, she had watched an act committed to impress her, to deserve her love, as other acts had been. And watching, there was pleasure. If only for a moment, but still there had been.

She might go away herself and often thought she would: in the calm of another time and place to flee the shadows of bravado. Instead, she stayed, a different person, too, belonging where the thing had happened. ♦

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GOD'S UNDERTAKER

How Thomas Hardy became everyone's favorite misanthrope.

BY ADAM KIRSCH

One Sunday morning in the middle of the nineteenth century, at a church in the Dorset village of Stinsford, a boy named Thomas Hardy had an experience that, more than sixty years later, he remembered as causing him "much mental distress." As the boy watched the priest deliver the sermon, Hardy recalled in his autobiography, "some mischievous movement of his mind set him imagining that the vicar was preaching mockingly, and he began trying to trace a humorous twitch in the corners of Mr. S—'s mouth, as if he could hardly keep a serious countenance. Once having imagined this the impish boy found to his consternation that he could not dismiss the idea."

If the Reverend Arthur Shirley, whose name Hardy courteously omitted, had noticed his young parishioner's amusement, he would not have recognized it for what it was: the first scratching of the seismograph that, within the boy's lifetime, would register the death of God. Hardy's "merriment," as he quietly but unmistakably shows, was the product of his dawning sense that nobody, not even the priest, could possibly take the church service seriously. There seems to be a straight line, if not a short one, from Hardy's "consternation" to the madness of the stranger who, in Nietzsche's famous parable, barges into churches to sing a requiem: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?"

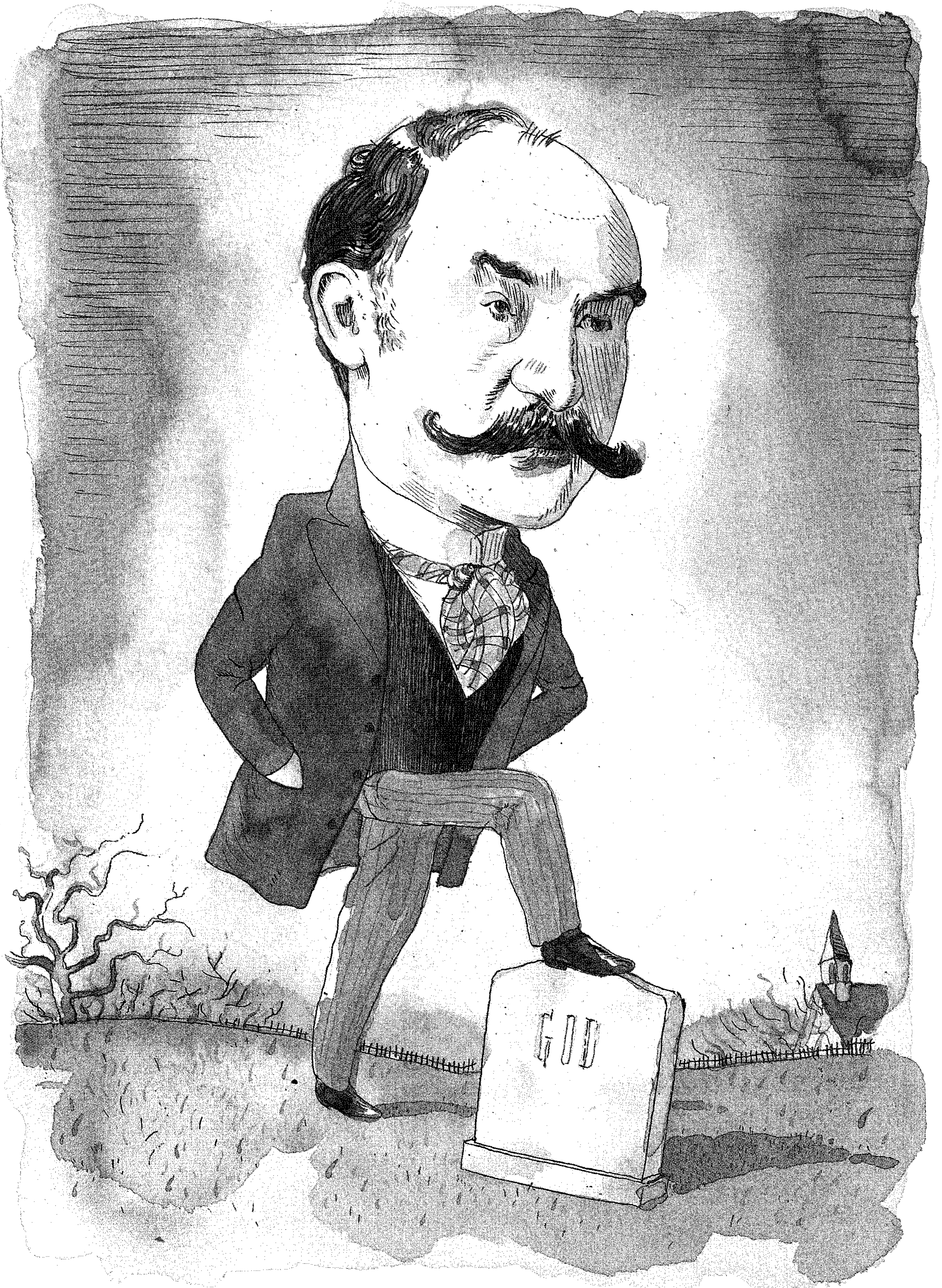
In another country, or with another temperament, the boy who laughed in church might have developed into a prophet who, like his German contemporary, went sneeringly without honor. But Thomas Hardy managed to spend a lifetime attacking and deriding the established values of Victorian England, only to end up as the establishment's favorite writer. In 1895, when he published his great novel "Jude the Obscure," with its punishing assault on conventional views of marriage, sex, and class, the newspapers reacted almost as furiously as they had to the trial of Oscar Wilde a few months earlier. "HARDY THE DEGENERATE," ran the headline in the *World;* the *Pall Mall Gazette* went with the inevitable "JUDE THE OBSCENE." Yet when he died, thirty-three years later—after embarking on a second career as a poet, and creating a body of work at least as important as his fiction—all was more than forgiven. Contrary to his own wishes, he was given a state funeral at Westminster Abbey, where his ten pallbearers included the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the heads of Cambridge and Oxford colleges, as well as Rudyard Kipling and A. E. Housman. But even then Hardy managed to elude the clutches of the great and the good: his body had already been cremated, and the coffin carried with such pomp contained nothing but a handful of ashes.

Not everyone was blind to the doubtful taste of giving such an outspoken atheist a Christian burial. Claire Tomalin, in the epilogue to her new biography, "Thomas Hardy" (Penguin; $35), quotes a letter that the beleaguered Dean of Westminster wrote to Hardy's local vicar, R. G. Bartelot, after receiving "furious protests" against the burial, "on the ground that his teaching was antichristian." Could Bartelot reassure the Dean of Hardy's "essential Christianity"? He could. "At heart," the vicar replied, he was "a Christian and a Churchman." It makes you wonder whether either of these clergymen had ever opened one of Hardy's books—for instance, his 1909 collection of poems, "Time's Laughingstocks and Other Verses," with its ode "To Sincerity":

> Life may be sad past saying,
> Its greens for ever graying,
> Its faiths to dust decaying;
>
> And youth may have foreknown it,
> And riper seasons shown it,
> But custom cries: "Disown it:
>
> "Say ye rejoice, though grieving,
> Believe, while unbelieving,
> Behold, without perceiving!"

Hardy knew his countrymen's capacity for respectable self-delusion, for the kind of mendacity that considers God's foe "essentially Christian." Indeed, he was not so much interested in persuading honest believers to abandon their beliefs as in shaming an already agnostic century into admitting the depths of its uncertainty. His novels, and especially his poems, describe a world from which God has already absconded, and for good. Because this is still the world we inhabit today, he remains one of the most vital and relevant of English writers—more modern, in some ways, than the modernists who succeeded and disdained him.

No one who knew Hardy as a child in the tiny village of Higher Bockhampton suspected that he would grow up to be a writer, much less a great writer. For one thing, he did not belong to the class that almost always produced great writers in England—the professional or clerical middle class, which could afford to send its sons to university. According to tradition, the family name had been the more aristocratic "le Hardy" centuries before, and Hardys had once been notable landowners in Dorset. But, like the ancient d'Urbervilles, in "Tess," who have degenerated into poor Durbeyfields, the Hardys had come down in the world. Hardy always took care to point out that his father and grandfather were not la-



Hardy found that he could express his atheistic views more frankly in poetry than he could in the more popular forum of his novels.

borers but master masons, skilled craftsmen with employees of their own. Still, his father did business in a very small way, and his mother, Jemima, had been a domestic servant before she got pregnant and married in a hurry—the wedding took place just over five months before Thomas was born, on June 2, 1840. The Hardys were the kind of people that Jane Austen would never have allowed into her parlor.

Given this background, Hardy's career could easily be read as a great Victorian success story, a parable of self-help in a functioning meritocracy. It is a story that Tomalin tells briskly and accessibly, though, as she acknowledges, it has been told many times before—most comprehensively by Michael Millgate, whose standard biography was reissued in an expanded edition in 2004. (It will be told again next month, when Yale publishes "Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life," by Ralph Pite—a more literary alternative to Tomalin, who uses Hardy's work mainly to illustrate his life.) The story was first told by Hardy himself, in two autobiographical volumes that were edited by his second wife, Florence, and published under her name. For most of the events of his early life, it is Hardy's version that all biographers have to follow.

Tomalin, like Hardy, sees his mother as the most important influence on the withdrawn and bookish boy. Thanks to Jemima, who dominated her charming, unambitious, music-loving husband, Thomas was sent to the best school in the neighborhood, in the nearby county town of Dorchester. By the age of sixteen, he had received a grounding in Latin and mathematics—if not quite enough to qualify for admission to Oxford or Cambridge, which the family could not have afforded in any case. Instead, Jemima arranged to have her son apprenticed to a local architect. If she had her way, he would be not a mere builder, like his father, but a professional man.

Though Hardy succeeded beyond his mother's imaginings, it didn't happen quickly. In all areas except the intellectual, he conceded, he was a late bloomer: "a child till he was sixteen, a youth till he was five-and-twenty, and a young man till he was nearly fifty." It was not until the age of thirty-two that he decisively gave up architecture for a literary career. From 1856 to 1872, he made his living as an assistant architect, first in Dorchester and then in London. The future atheist developed something of a specialty in church restoration, during a period when ancient churches across England were being repaired, and often ruined, at a furious pace.

It was on one such job, in the Cornish village of St. Juliot in 1870, that he met the woman who became his first wife, Emma Gifford. Emma was the sister-in-law of the local rector, whose decaying church Hardy had been sent to examine, and she seems to have struck Hardy as embodying the wildness and beauty of the remote coast. That is the impression he gives in an unusually joyful poem he wrote the same year, which refers to Cornwall by an antique, Arthurian name: "When I came back from Lyonnesse / With magic in my eyes, / All marked with mute surmise / My radiance rare and fathomless."

The lines are poignant in retrospect, since the romance Hardy embarked on so happily was to end in one of the unhappiest marriages in literary history. Much of Tomalin's book is devoted to sorting out the rights and wrongs of the Hardy marriage, and no one has done it more judiciously or convincingly. The problem, simply put, was that Hardy outgrew his wife, whose charming lightness of spirit eventually came to seem more like ditziness, or worse. Visitors who wrote down their impressions of Max Gate, the rather ugly house Hardy built for himself outside Dorchester, tended to agree that Emma came across as ridiculous. There was "something intolerable," wrote one guest quoted by Millgate, about Hardy being forced "to live day & night with the absurd, inconsequent, huffy, rambling old lady." No wonder Hardy started to spend more and more time with his aristocratic female admirers, or that Emma, in response, turned against her husband and all his works. By the time she died, in 1912, Emma was insulting Hardy in front of friends, pressing Bibles on him in order to save his lost soul, and even remarking that he looked "extremely like Crippen," the notorious wife-murderer.

In the intoxicated summer of 1870, however, the match seemed an ideal one to both Thomas and Emma. She was decidedly a step up for him socially, while he might have been her last chance

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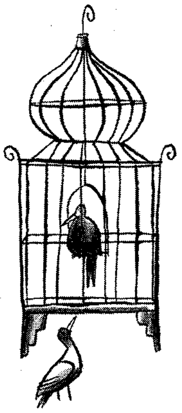
to escape spinsterhood. But Hardy was poor, and Emma's relatives snobbish, and the marriage didn't happen for another four years. Not by coincidence, it was during those years of suspense that Hardy made himself into a professional writer. He had been writing poems all through the eighteen-sixties, but he did not manage to get any of them published and soon gave up trying. The major poems of his twenties—"Hap," "Neutral Tones," "She, to Him"—were not published until 1898, in his first poetry collection, "Wessex Poems and Other Verses."

Instead, he turned his efforts to fiction, and by early 1868 he had completed a draft of his first novel, "The Poor Man and the Lady." The manuscript does not survive, leaving biographers to speculate about what seems to have been a heavy-handed satire on fashionable London. Decades later, Hardy called it a "striking socialistic novel." It was too strikingly socialistic, at any rate, for any publisher's taste. George Meredith, acting as an adviser for Chapman and Hall, told Hardy not to "nail his colours to the mast" quite so irrevocably in his maiden effort. He took the advice to heart, waiting until his very last novel, "Jude," to scarify English hypocrisy.

The rejections were, however, couched in encouraging terms and Hardy started on a new novel that would be, if anything, too flagrantly commercial: the sensationalistic "Desperate Remedies." It is a measure of Hardy's determination to get into print that he agreed to pay his publishers, the downmarket Tinsley Brothers, a seventy-five-pound guarantee against costs. The book sold moderately, Hardy got back most of his money, and Tinsley offered to pay thirty pounds for his next novel, "Under the Greenwood Tree." This affectionate comedy of village life was Hardy's first real success. It was popular enough for Tinsley to ask Hardy to produce a magazine serial, which was how a Victorian novelist could earn real money. At last, Hardy had the confidence to quit architecture. For the rest of his life, he lived by his pen.

By his mid-thirties, then, Hardy was a celebrated writer, earning a good living, published in the best magazines, and married to the woman he loved. Considering where he had started in life, he must have realized that he was outstandingly successful. Yet, as Hardy grew older, it was failure that increasingly occupied his thoughts and inspired his best writing. Tomalin tries to account for this by suggesting that "the wounds inflicted by life never quite healed over in Hardy." But such bland psychologizing misses the essential point: Hardy's pessimism was not a helpless reaction to traumas but the cast of his sensibility, that indispensable and unaccountable lens through which every artist makes sense of the world. In the early eighteen-eighties, Hardy produced a series of minor novels for which he was well paid but which are seldom read today: "Two on a Tower," "The Trumpet-Major," "A Laodicean." It was not until "The Mayor of Casterbridge," published in 1886, that he embarked on the string of major novels—including "The Woodlanders," "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," and, finally, "Jude the Obscure"—on which his fame mainly rests. And these books take place in a world of shocking and harrowing bleakness.



The name of this world, of course, is Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon term for southwest England that Hardy was largely responsible for popularizing. One of the pleasures of Hardy's novels, which makes them so lovely in spite of their harshness, is his reconstruction of the folkways and landscapes of Dorset and surroundings, whose place-names he translated into Wessex equivalents: Dorchester becomes Casterbridge, and so on. Soon, tourists came looking for these places—a book called "The Wessex of Thomas Hardy" appeared as early as 1902. Hardy prided himself on his accuracy as a historian of his native place. "At the dates represented in the various narrations," he insisted, "things were like that in Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive certain customs, just as they are shown doing in these pages." By the end of Hardy's long life, many of these ways—the folk magic, the bawdy parades, the ballads, the harvest-home dinners—had disappeared. When "Far from the Madding Crowd" was published, the reviewer for the *Spectator* recognized that Hardy was writing about a world from which his readers were already exiled: "A book like this is, in relation to many of the scenes it describes, the nearest equivalent to actual experience which a great many of us are ever likely to boast of."

That is still a large part of Hardy's appeal as a novelist. The sheep farm in "Far from the Madding Crowd," the apple orchard in "The Woodlanders," the dairy in "Tess" are miniature Edens, where agricultural labor feels like a kind of pagan meditation. Yet Eden was not more rudely violated by the serpent than Wessex is, repeatedly, by its creator. Michael Henchard, in "The Mayor of Casterbridge," gets drunk and sells his wife to a stranger, setting off a chain of punishments that continues for a quarter century. Old Mrs. Yeobright, in "The Return of the Native," treks miles through the August heat to try to reconcile with her son, is turned away by his adulterous wife, and then dies of heatstroke on the way home—for good measure, she also gets bitten by a snake. Tess murders her seducer with a carving knife in their rented room. Most notoriously of all, Jude's uncanny son, known only as Father Time, hangs himself and his little brother and sister, leaving behind a note: "Done because we are too menny."

It is a tribute to Hardy's powers that catastrophes on such a scale do not plunge his novels into melodrama or absurdity. Rather, we accept them, as we do in the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare, as the symbolic casualties inflicted on humanity by a cosmos that is fundamentally cruel. This resort to the cosmic is part of what makes Hardy's books feel more like dramas than novels. Indeed, if Hardy found it possible to stop writing fiction in the middle of his life and at the height of his powers—a renunciation unimaginable from, say, Henry James—it is partly because he was never truly committed to the novel as a form, the way James or Flaubert were. As he acknowledged in his autobiography, "It was not as if he had been a writer of novels proper, and as more specifically understood, that is, stories of modern artificial life and manners showing a certain smartness of treatment. He had mostly aimed, and mostly succeeded, to keep his narratives close to natural life, and as near to poetry in their subject as the conditions would allow, and had often regretted that those conditions would not let him keep them nearer still."

Here, as throughout his autobiography, Hardy is writing to convince the reader that his identity as a poet predated his occupation as a novelist. But he is also expressing an important truth about his work and his sensibility. The virtues of his novels are not the ones we commonly look for in fiction. What one remembers is not dialogue or the evolution of character but brilliantly orchestrated scenes, detached and nearly emblematic in their simplicity. Henry Knight clinging to a cliff face in "A Pair of Blue Eyes," and being rescued by Elfride Swancourt, who rips up her petticoats to make a rope; Angel Clare carrying Tess through the river; even Arabella Donn shocking Jude out of his reveries by throwing a pig's penis at him: these are the coups de théâtre in which the whole life of Hardy's novels is condensed. Not coincidentally, they are also moments of intensely sublimated sexuality. Victorian readers may have insisted, as Tomalin says, on "romance without sex," but Hardy, one of the most genuinely erotic of novelists, didn't need to portray sex to make the reader swoon. He could do it with a sword blade, as when Sergeant Troy woos Bathsheba Everdene by demonstrating his prowess:

> In an instant the atmosphere was transformed to Bathsheba's eyes. Beams of light caught from the low sun's rays, above, around, in front of her, well-nigh shut out earth and heaven—all emitted in the marvellous evolutions of Troy's reflecting blade, which seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere specially. These circling gleams were accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a whistling—also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand.

Even as a novelist, then, Hardy was a poet, using image and metaphor to unify stories that he knew were deformed by pressure to get a sensational twist into each installment of the serial. So it makes sense that, after writing "Tess" and "Jude," he would turn, or return, to verse. Those novels contained as much of his view of life as he could put into prose; to go any further into his dark places, he recognized, would mean leaving the novel-reading public behind.

HERE YOU ARE

It's such a relief to see the woman you love walk out the door some nights
for it's ten o'clock and you need your eight hours of sleep
and one glass of wine has been more than enough
and, as for lust—well, you can live without it most days
and you are glad, too, the Ukrainian masseuse you see every Wednesday
is not in love with you, and has no plans to be, for it is the pain
in your back you need relief from most, not that ambiguous itch,
and the wild successes of your peers no longer bother you
nor do your unresolved religious cravings or the general injustice
of the world, no, there is very little, in fact, that bothers you these days
when you turn first to the obituaries, second to the stock market,
then, after a long pause, to the book review, you are becoming
a good citizen, you do your morning exercises, count
your accumulated small blessings, thank the Lord
that there's a trolley just outside your door your girlfriend
can take back home to her own bed and here you are
it is morning you are alone every little heartbeat
is yours to cherish the future is on fire with nothing
but its own kindling and whatever is burning in its flames
it isn't you and now you will take a shower and this is it.

—*Michael Blumenthal*

Indeed, Hardy could not have written a novel as reckless of taboos, as defiantly uningratiating, as "Jude the Obscure" if he had not already begun to bid farewell, inwardly, to his novelist's career. For more than twenty years, he had dutifully neutered his novels at the behest of editors like the Reverend Dr. Donald Macleod, who published "The Trumpet-Major" in *Good Words*, but only after warning Hardy to avoid "anything—direct or indirect—which a healthy *Parson* like myself would not care to read to his bairns at the fireside." Even a sophisticated man of letters like Leslie Stephen, the editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, criticized Hardy for allowing his heroines to get involved with scoundrels. When Hardy pointed out that in fact women often do marry the wrong man, Stephen replied, "Not in magazines."

In "Jude," Hardy attacked this kind of repression and evasion with the fictional equivalent of a sledgehammer. Indeed, as Tomalin writes, "Reading *Jude* is like being hit in the face over and over again," as we witness the slow death of each of Jude Fawley's hopes and ideals. He studies hard for years, hoping to overcome poverty and work his way into Christminster, the novel's version of Oxford, but he is casually rejected. He loses his rigid self-control only once, when he gives in to the village seductress Arabella, but this minor slip dooms him to marry a woman he has already begun to loathe. When Arabella leaves for Australia, Jude is free to pursue Sue Bridehead, his cousin and soul mate. But they harbor neuroses about sex and marriage too powerful to overcome, and their experiment in free love ends in horror. At every turn, the institutions of Victorian society—marriage, family, church, university—thwart human happiness, as if they had been designed by a misanthropic god.

It is no wonder that the Church of England's newspaper called the book "a shameful nightmare, which one only wishes to forget as quickly and as completely as possible"; or that the public, inflamed by the scandal, made it a best-seller. For the cautious and private Hardy, notoriety of the kind that would have delighted Zola or Shaw was agonizing. He could see the funny side when an outraged Australian reader burned a copy of "Jude" and mailed him the ashes. But he was genuinely pained, Tomalin writes, to notice that "some of his acquaintances turned away rather than speak to him."

In 1896, a year after “Jude” was published, he noted, “Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.”

For the rest of his life, then, Hardy set to writing poetry with the grateful fervor of an escaped prisoner; his “Collected Poems” fill more than eight hundred pages. His sheer productivity, and the eccentricities of his verse style, at first made his poetry easier to mock than appreciate. One reviewer of “Wessex Poems” wondered “why he did not . . . burn the verse” instead of publishing it, and modernist critics generally treated it with condescension. But today Hardy’s poetry is beloved for precisely the qualities that once made it unfashionable: its profusion and formal variety, its homely, surprising diction, its interest in narrative, and, above all, its unchallengeable sincerity. Unlike the poetry of Yeats or Eliot, Hardy’s poems emerge naturally from the occasions of his life. He can be provoked to verse an old Wessex legend or the latest bulletins from the Boer War, a fleeting memory of an old romance or the sinking of the Titanic.

No matter what the subject, Hardy devoted his poetry to laying out his magnificently sombre, completely disillusioned view of the world. The central fact of that world was the disappearance of God, and with it any reason for believing in providence or justice. Hardy’s most famous poem on this theme is “God’s Funeral,” which describes a procession carrying the corpse of the “man-projected Figure . . . whom we can no longer keep alive.” Yet this poem is perhaps too monumental, too self-consciously a “statement,” to capture the complex flavor of Hardy’s godlessness. For it is not only the absence of God that Hardy reckons with; it is the way that absence changes how we think about ethics, mortality, and value, the way it challenges all our traditions and aspirations.

It is only against this anti-theological background that Hardy’s famous poems of mourning for his wife take on their full significance. Tomalin begins her biography with a prologue about these “Poems of 1912-13,” making the striking but misleading argument that Emma’s death was “when Thomas Hardy became a great poet.” Not only is this not true on the merits—he had already written masterpieces like “I Look Into My Glass,” “A Wasted Illness,” and the “In Tenebris” sequence—but it is also a simplistic account of the way life is transmuted into art. For what makes the “Poems of 1912-13” so haunting is that Hardy’s imagery of ghosts and revenants is itself haunted by his conviction, demonstrated in so many earlier poems, that there is no such thing as an immortal soul. He knows that seeing Emma again is impossible, which is why his poems about seeing her again are so charged with hopeless longing, as in “The Voice”:

> Can it be you that I hear? Let me view
> you, then,
> Standing as when I drew near to the
> town
> Where you would wait for me: yes, as I
> knew you then,
> Even to the original air-blue gown!

He asks even though he knows the answer—has given it himself, in “Your Last Drive,” when he has Emma remind him, “I shall not know/How many times you visit me there,/Or what your thoughts are. . . . And I shall not care.” Yet, in the awful paradox of grief, it is Emma who tells him that she cannot tell him anything. She has been resurrected, in his poems, just long enough to confirm that she will not be resurrected.

It is this readiness to confront bitter facts, and to make their bitterness sweet through his art, that makes Hardy not just a great writer but a wise and trustworthy one. Poetry has had plenty of mystics and experimenters since Hardy’s death; even before he died, he saw that the modernists were turning toward the forbidden magics of vitalism, occultism, and nihilism. “At present,” he wrote in 1922, “when belief in witches of Endor is displacing the Darwinian theory and ‘the truth that shall make you free,’ men’s minds appear . . . to be moving backwards rather than on.” But almost a century later, when Yeats’s visions and Eliot’s piety and Pound’s politics seem to belong to a troubled past, it is Hardy’s sad Victorian rationalism that still has the power to convince, and to console. ♦

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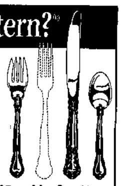

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BOOKS

BOMBAY NOIR

Vikram Chandra's gangster epic.

BY PANKAJ MISHRA

In Vikram Chandra's new novel, "Sacred Games" (HarperCollins; $27.95), Ganesh Gaitonde, a sort of Bombay Al Capone, expresses his contempt for the English-speaking classes, people oblivious of the rampant criminality underpinning their serene existence: "These Englishwallahs were always superior, as if the world they lived in was some other one, far from my barrack, my streets, my home." Describing the exploits of Gaitonde and his determined pursuer, Sartaj Singh, a Bombay cop, Chandra's intensely ambitious nine-hundred-page work seems, at times, an attempt to make amends for the ignorance of Englishwallahs. Gaitonde not only relishes murder and destruction but also dabbles in filmmaking, works closely with Indian intelligence, and gets involved in a Hindu extremist plan to detonate a nuclear bomb in Bombay and provoke India into a suicidal war with Pakistan. Few pages go by in "Sacred Games" without a reminder that "the world is shot through with crime, riddled with it, rotted by it," or, as Gaitonde's spiritual adviser, Guru-ji, puts it, "Life feeds on life, Ganesh. And the beginning of life is violence."

This violence takes explicit form in many scenes of torture and murder. Englishwallahs may be discomfited to learn that "the sound of a finger breaking is not very large, but it is dry, sharper than you expect. It is a quick, creaky sound, a small firecracker bursting." Chandra's stylish, worldly prose attains a Tarantinoesque rapture when it describes Gaitonde severing an arm with a sword, slashing at a human eye with a razor blade, or burning, in an "elegant way," a slum: "There is the crisp tinkle of glass and the small sparking flares now bloom into flowing rivers that run smoothly across rooftops, down walls, into windows. The fire speaks now, it makes a joyous, throaty grumbling as it eats, there is no stopping it."

In the interconnected stories of "Love and Longing in Bombay" (1997), Chandra gracefully evoked a city of immense struggles, dreams, and pain. In "Sacred Games," that city, dominated by megalomaniacal criminals and corrupt cops, has put on much "resplendent and rotting flesh." But then Bombay itself has transformed rapidly in the past decade and a half—a period during which the city's official name was changed to Mumbai—as India's religious and political conflicts have finally caught up with the city's traditionally business-minded and cosmopolitan communities. In December, 1992, during the nationwide riots that followed the demolition of a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists, hundreds of people in Bombay, mostly Muslims, were killed; retaliatory bomb attacks, allegedly masterminded by a Muslim don living in Dubai, killed nearly three hundred people, creating religious tensions among the hitherto secular fraternity of criminals. Though Bombay has prospered greatly from the liberalization of India's state-controlled economy in the nineteen-nineties, it has also become home to feral forms of capitalism. In recent years, a series of scandals and scams have exposed an intricate network of greed, envy, and lust which binds politicians, tycoons, and civil servants to Mafia dons, Bollywood stars, and slumlords.

Vikram Chandra

Such material—with its prodigies of arcane socioeconomic detail and suggestions of disorder—might appear overwhelming to a novelist. But Chandra, who grew up in Bombay and who now teaches creative writing at Berkeley, mines it confidently. Sartaj and Gaitonde, pursuing their separate destinies across Bombay, happen upon an extraordinarily diverse sampling of humanity—from an aspiring Muslim fashion model from provincial India who ends up as Gaitonde's mistress to a militant Maoist who turns into an armed robber. More ardently than most recent chroniclers of India's most hectic metropolis, Chandra embraces the vitality as well as the vulgarity of the millions chasing the "big dream of Bombay": the "boys and girls who had come from dusty villages and now looked down at you from the hoardings, beautiful and unreal." Chandra delights in the profanity of Bombay street talk, which he renders in a hard, garish vocabulary, often composed of as many untranslated Hindi words as English ones. Non-Indian readers of "Sacred Games" may be frustrated by what can seem a research-heavy attempt at authenticity. But Chandra seems determined to show how his characters, particularly Gaitonde, define and savor their identities through speech. Here is Gaitonde describing the improvisations of his gang:

> They learned the language, and then the walk, and they pretended to be something, and then they became it. And so for American dollars, we said choklete, not Dalda like the rest of our world; for British pounds, lalten, not peetal; for heroin and brown sugar, gulal, not atta; for police, Iftekar, not nau-number; a job gone wrong was ghanta, not fachchad; and a girl so impossibly ripe and round and tight that it hurt to look at her was not a chabbis, but a churi.

Chandra shares generously his knowledge about how criminals living in luxurious hideaways in Dubai and Thailand control the films made in Bombay's studios—the novel is replete with many such details of our globalized world. A school-

JACQUES DE LOUSTAL

boyish romance with James Bond-like heroes lingers in his descriptions of spies and spooks: "K.D. feels always that he is sitting at a node in a web, at the intersection of globe-spanning lines of energy that hum and spin and change shape. He can strum a thread here, and ten thousand miles away a man will slump in a doorway." He frequently digresses in order to visit the great landmarks of India's post-colonial history: the violence of Partition, in 1947, Communist insurgencies, drug- and gunrunning scandals, and the rise of religious extremism and terrorism. Endlessly, even alarmingly, fecund—the book contains four "insets," or backstories of peripheral characters, amounting to nearly one-sixth of the whole—Chandra is clearly inspired by the Hindu-Buddhist mandala, a symbolic representation of the cosmos in colored sand, which Sartaj, not uncoincidentally, watches being drawn by Tibetan monks on a Bombay street. As in a typical, multipanelled mandala, "Sacred Games" offers many stories simultaneously, while allowing us to gaze separately at each life in its own moment of being.

No figure in the novel's intricate design, however, provides greater pleasure than Sartaj, the Sikh cop in pursuit of Gaitonde. "Past forty, a divorced police inspector with middling professional prospects," and orbiting uneasily close to a "vast constellation of ambition and wealth and power," Sartaj seems initially built from the conventions of the L.A. detective novel. But he achieves a gruff attractiveness all his own as Chandra describes his trawls through Bombay's seething streets and shantytowns, his melancholy solitude, his muted romanticism, and his "senseless, embarrassing idealism," which is often challenged by the "aged-and-cured wickedness of the city, its piquant scandals, its bitter breakdowns, its ferociously musty unfairness." So deeply does Chandra immerse him in the swarm of the quotidian—the "enormous bustle of millions on the move, the hurtling local trains with thick clusters of bodies hanging precariously from the doors, the sonorous tramp and hum of the crowd inside the tall hall of Churchgate Station"—that saving Bombay from nuclear holocaust appears to be all in a day's work.

Loving his characters equally, Chandra endows many of them with an unexpected dignity: Sartaj's partner, a compromised figure who manhandles suspects and takes bribes, returns home to a full and happy family life. Chandra's genial mood of acceptance seems part of a Hindu vision of human affairs as *leela*, or sacred game, which transcends easy distinctions between good and evil—a world view that both major and minor characters in the novel, spies and cops as well as criminals, magnify. As the Indian intelligence officer who recruits Gaitonde in the fight against Islamist terrorism puts it:

> To play this game well, you had to handle bad men, you had to have them do bad things which were finally good things. It was necessary. Only those who had never been on a real battlefield asked for unstained virtue and unblemished deeds. On the field, all actions were only provisionally moral, and the game was eternal.

Playing the endless games of the Cold War, the characters of John le Carré's novels didn't think much differently, but Chandra is after something bigger. He has spoken in interviews of the possibility of taking the novel beyond the modern Western conceptions that have defined it, such as of the bourgeois individual who seeks self-knowledge and strives to establish his moral worth before his peers in a historically circumscribed society. Chandra believes that many Indians, pulled between tradition and modernity in a chaotically populous and poor country, have a less psychologically inhibited sense of self and a mythic, rather than a historical, sense of their place in the world.

The philosophical ambition of "Sacred Games" owes much to Bollywood films. To Chandra, these seem to capture the flexible nature of non-bourgeois self-perceptions, moving as they do from documentary naturalism to an epic mode of storytelling without getting bogged down in psychological realism. Dropping his characters into the tumult of recent national history, he occasionally seems to adopt a more conventional mode of novel-writing about India. But his stance, unlike Salman Rushdie's or Rohinton Mistry's, is of a calm Homeric objectivity, as he tries to realize afresh what seems, after many long novels from the subcontinent, a particularly Indian ambition to retool the novel as an epic form.

Certainly, Gaitonde, the only character to be accorded first-person narration, displays self-regard on an epic scale as he describes his bloody rise to power, his ill-fated marriage, and his doomed attempts

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to be loved by his mistress. Gorging on a sense of power and control—he orders an assassination in London as coolly as he summons Bollywood starlets to his yacht in Thailand—he resembles the Hydra-headed demons in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. His anxiety about his small penis, which exposes him to quack remedies on the Internet, sounds a bit bourgeois; but the quality of his self-delusion approaches the monstrous. A few pages after raping a boy in prison, he announces that he "grew more quietly reflective, more interested in the world."

It is clear from early in his narration that Gaitonde suffers from a fractured identity of the kind that makes Tony Soprano seek out a psychotherapist. There is, however, no Jennifer Melfi figure here to provide him—or the reader—temporary relief from his psychoses (unless we count Guru-ji, whose advice that Gaitonde should accrue spiritual potency by sleeping with virgins, for instance, does not seem especially useful). Lurching from cruelty to sentimentality and naïve boastfulness over hundreds of pages, Gaitonde threatens to turn into a bore; Chandra's decision to endow him with an excess of epic self-consciousness rather than the bourgeois capacity for self-examination seems risky in a novel of this length. In any case, the real subject of Chandra's book—the small but heroic struggles of the human spirit against the mundane—seems to lie not so much in Gaitonde's story as in Sartaj's, or in the fleeting scenes of heartbreak and despair that hover above and under the main narrative. There is a moment, for example, in one of the long insets which describes Sartaj's mother as a young woman in pre-Partition India:

> Prabhjot Kaur saw how Ram Pari and her children were making their home. They had bundles, none of which Prabhjot Kaur could remember seeing during the long day, but from these bundles they now pulled sheets and rags, strips and tatters, which, arranged on the ground close to the house in a rough, jagged circle, became a habitation. Prabhjot Kaur saw how the shadow of a wall alone could be a shelter. She went to sleep filled to the brim with this new knowledge. She remembered all the drawings she had made of "My Home" in her long life, and now she knew that all those simple boxy houses she had drawn were somehow a lie.

There are few such moments of self-reckoning and revelation in "Sacred Games," which seems to abide too easily, even zestfully, in degradation and depravity. Travelling around India toward the end of his life, Gaitonde is exposed to its grotesque new contradictions: "We met farmers who carried mobile phones and murdered their daughters and sons for marrying out of caste, we bought bottles of mineral water from scabby, barefooted chokras whose arms were covered with ringworm." But the tone of moral inquiry, incongruously voiced by Gaitonde, who is as serenely homicidal as ever, comes too late in the book.

By then, Chandra is spending most of his narrative's energy trying to make his reader believe in the threat of a nuclear bomb going off in Bombay. Gaitonde imagines the "crawling ants' nest of a city eaten by fire, all of it crumpled and black and twisting and finally gone." He says, "I knew that what men can imagine, they can make real. And so I was terrified." As fear of atrocity quickens the novel's last pages, Chandra appears to have realized his ambition to seduce and hold the reader with the sheer power of storytelling. Even the novel's somewhat predictable happy ending reveals the over-all pattern of the book to be as "hypnotically complex" as the mandala that Sartaj observes.

Yet this triumph feels minor. For we expect from literary novels with large claims on our time satisfactions much deeper than those regularly available at the movies; and the elaborately contrived plot of "Sacred Games" seems finally to offer a vision no more compelling than the romantic brutality and cynicism of hard-boiled crime fiction. Chandra's moral imagination seems too much in thrall to the kind of sensationalist fantasy underpinning disaster movies that manipulate terror in an age obsessed with terror—the fantasy that, as Susan Sontag defined it in her essay "The Imagination of Disaster," helps many people to cope with the twin threat of "unremitting banality and inconceivable terror" by offering "an escape into exotic, dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings." Unlike those novelists who have much to say but lack the necessary craft, Chandra seems to be able to do anything. His violent naturalism superbly renders the disorder of the contemporary world. Yet it is unable to transcend an equally pervasive intellectual and spiritual complacency. Conceived on a grand scale, "Sacred Games" leads us to expect more than self-sufficient virtuosity from a writer who possesses the rare, prodigious power to make literature. ♦

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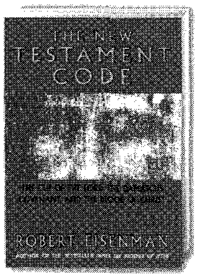

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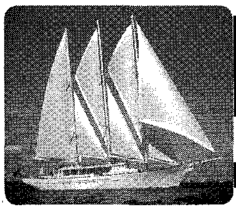

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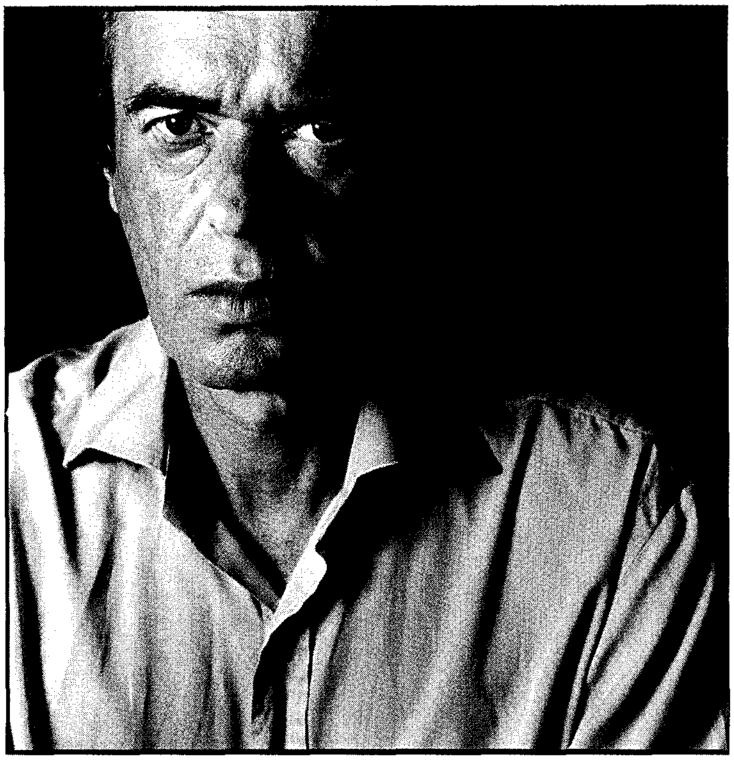
BOOKS

PRISONERS

Russian terrors old and new.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Martin Amis's recent book "Koba the Dread" (2002), a denunciation of Stalin's regime, was itself denounced by some critics. Why, they asked, had it taken Amis so long, until he was in his fifties, to realize that Stalin's Soviet Union was not a nice place? Books on the subject had been around for more than a half century. And why, given that fact, did Amis seem to think he was bringing us the news? Why his tone of indignation, as if everyone else were sitting around comfortably, indifferent to Stalin's crimes, and he alone remembered? Solzhenitsyn might bear a grudge, but Amis?



Martin Amis revisits the former Soviet Union, this time for a novel.

GRAHAM WOOD/LONDON SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Such complaints did not put him off the subject. His new book, "House of Meetings" (Knopf; $23), is also about the Soviet Union under Stalin. It is a novel, however, and fiction, because it is so firmly anchored in the particular—this character, this story—has a way of stifling authorial self-regard. Amis requires such chastening, for, as "Koba" showed, self-regard comes naturally to him. Fortunately, so does fiction. In "House of Meetings" he has returned to it, and much of the book is wonderful.

It is the story—told as a flashback—of two Russians, the narrator (never named) and his half brother, Lev, who end up in the same Siberian labor camp, as political prisoners, after the Second World War. The narrator is a practical man. Lev is the opposite: a poet, a pacifist. When he arrives at the camp, he is assigned to sleep on the floor of his barracks, where all the germs, not to speak of the scorn, will rain down on him. The narrator is scandalized by Lev's acceptance of this. Why doesn't he beat up the man in the nearest bunk and take his bed? "By what right?" Lev asks. "The right to life," the narrator replies. "To me, by now, violence was a neutral instrument," he says. "It was currency, like tobacco, like bread." But Lev wants no part of it, and so, for the ten years that they spend together in the camp, the narrator uses his own fists to protect Lev. Lev is grateful. The two men love each other. But Lev knows that his brother also wishes him dead, because Lev married the woman, Zoya, whom the narrator wanted.

Though Amis, in his previous novels, has been something of a meta-fictioneer, the shining virtue of "House of Meetings" is its old-fashioned psychological realism. Amis, like Primo Levi, his great predecessor in prison-camp memorialization, is able to calculate *degrees* of anguish. Lev can stand the infestation of lice—"I reach into my shirt," he says, "and if they're only little ones I think fuck it and put them back"—but eventually he cannot bear his dirtiness, the fact that his clothes are stiff, barklike, from his body's excrescences. This makes him weep. On the other hand, when, in the camp, his soul receives the blow from which it will never recover, he does not cry. His eyes, the narrator says, were "swiveled inward, where they were doing the work of decrease." The work of decrease—how modest this is, how final. Throughout the book we get such nuances: the counter-currents, the backflow, of suffering.

The suffering is further complicated by Amis's habit of relating it to sex. "House of Meetings" is one of the few major novels I know of that take rape as a central topic. The narrator introduces himself to us as a "decorated rapist." He served in the Second World War, and, like many others in the Red Army, he raped his way across Germany in 1945. Later, his culminating crime is to take a woman by force. But sex is everywhere in this book. Midway through, we meet that staple of the camp narrative, the truly sadistic officer, in this case the well-named Uglik. He clouts Lev on the ears so hard that his hearing is permanently damaged. Uglik's punishment is worse, however. That night, he collapses, drunk, in the snow and spends five hours in the Arctic cold, with the result that both his hands have to be amputated. A few days later, the men in the barracks watch him as, sitting on the porch of the infirmary, he tries to extract a cigarette from his pack without calling for help: "He cuffed the packet onto the floor and kicked it about; he knelt, trying to use his stumped forearms as levers and pincers; then he lay flat on his stomach, and, like a man trying to possess the wooden floor, trying to enter it, trying to kiss it, writhed and rutted about until he snuffled one up with his questing lips." This sight, both disgusting and piteous, of Uglik humping the porch, is the book's central image. Years later, it still haunts Lev in his dreams. In "House of Meetings," sex is a lost paradise. The two brothers have a private joke in which they call Zoya, the book's sexual standard-bearer, "the Americas." This is the Americas in the Age of Discovery sense: palm trees, mangoes, Eden. As the book goes on, Amis extends the metaphor. The "great shaft" of Zoya's throat, the narrator says, "was like an aquarium of shifting blues and crimsons." She is a whole coral reef: color, warmth, cleanness. And she cannot be enjoyed. After their release from the camp, both brothers go to bed with her, and are dead to the experience. That is Amis's symbol for the harm that the Russian state has done to its people.

It is interesting, in the face of such burning beauties and griefs—so uncontrived, it seems—to consider the number of old, gear-grinding narrative ploys that Amis uses to move his novel forward. Already in Chapter 1, the narrator tells us that for twenty-two years he has had in his possession a letter that he has never opened. Later, he tells us about Lev's great crisis in the camp, the time when he began the "work of decrease." The narrator knows that this was triggered by a "conjugal visit" that Lev had from Zoya, but he doesn't know what happened between them. As Amis keeps dropping hints, we realize that the answer is in the unopened letter, which is from Lev to the narrator. At this point, if we have read other novels by Amis we may suspect that he is laying a trap—that in the end he will withhold the answer and laugh at us for our childish wish to solve a mystery. But that's not what he does. The letter is printed in full in the second-to-last chapter, and it solves the mystery.

That letter is not the only loaded gun. The book itself is a letter, from the narrator to a stepdaughter whom he acquired late in his life. From page to page, he warns her about what's coming. Soon I will shock you, he says. Soon there will be a "thunderclap." This blatant suspense-building may be a species of postmodernism. If so, it is that late-in-the-day postmodernism in which the embrace of the timeworn, the corny, comes to seem not ironic but heartfelt. But I would guess that the intent was never ironic. At least in the prison-camp episodes, Amis seems to have been so impressed with the gravity of his material that, in deference, he withheld his habitual knowingness. Compared with his average product, "House of Meetings" is short and clear. We actually know what's happening, and that is a blessing.

The book opens in 2004. The narrator, an old man now and an American citizen (he defected), is on a return trip to Siberia. The story of his and Lev's camp years is thus interleaved with scenes of the new Russia. The surprise is that he finds today's Russia as appalling as the old one. Many of the events in the novel are keyed to upheavals in Russian history, and the narrator's return to Siberia is made to coincide with the Beslan massacre of September, 2004, in which Chechen terrorists took over a school in North Ossetia. The narrator's day-to-day summaries of the news reports on this crisis are more horrifying than anything else in the book. Inside the gymnasium, the sweltering children are drinking their own urine. Outside, the bodies of people killed on the first day are decomposing. Finally, on the third day, "the bomb falls from the basketball hoop and the roof of the gym comes down. And if you were a killer, then this was your time. It is not given to many—the chance to shoot children in the back as they swerve in their underwear past rotting corpses." In the end, a hundred and eighty-six children were killed. "And now there is a doctor, on the television, who says that some of the surviving children 'have no eyes.' " The narrator tells us that every Russian he talks to believes that this was the work not of Chechens but of the Russian government, looking to raise public support for its war in Chechnya.

As the horrors accumulate, Amis finally unleashes his accustomed phantasmagoria, the witches' Sabbath that we have encountered so often in his novels. Modern Siberia swarms with Russians in tracksuits, flocking to work in the factories there and destined to die early from industrial pollution. In a public square, the narrator finds kiosks selling anti-Semitic paperbacks, together with *spirt*, or surgical alcohol, at thirty cents a bottle. Numbed by *spirt*, the people collapse in "blood-colored puddles infested with iron oxide, used syringes, used condoms." Starving dogs prowl the streets, and cars aim for them. At one point, a bus speeds up to run over a pregnant dog, and the passengers cheer as they hear the "sodden thud." Another dog circles back to her and mounts her. Rape again, this time of a dead body.

"This isn't the Second World any more," the narrator says. "It is not even the Third World. It is the Fourth. It is what happens *after*." Nor can any plea be entered for what happened before. Many people consider the crimes of Soviet Russia more forgivable than those of Nazi Germany, on the ground that the Communists began with a humanitarian purpose: they wanted the best, but everything went wrong. In "House of Meetings," the narrator brings up this argument and tells us that he can't find a single Russian who agrees with it. The Communist bosses didn't want the best, people tell him; "They wanted what they got. They wanted the worst." And so, the book seems to say, do Russia's current leaders.

In its material—the camps, the misery, the engulfing sense of sin, the positing of Russia not as a country but as an emblem of human fate—"House of Meetings" reminds us of Dostoyevsky. In its portrayal of a family where two men are in love with the same woman, and in its lining up of brothers who seem to represent segments of the Russian soul, it specifically recalls "The Brothers Karamazov." (Lev and the narrator have a third brother, who is a monster, like Smerdyakov.) The ending of "The Brothers Karamazov," where Alyosha asks us just to love one another, has sometimes been criticized as a throwing up of hands in response to the great question of human evil which the book raises. Amis, addressing the same question, likewise has no answer. In place of Dostoyevsky's orthodox Christianity, he gives us Manichaeanism. Russia, the narrator says, is the "nightmare country": "No power, no freedom, no responsibility, ever, in all our history." But Lev, in his letter—from which, after the long drum roll, we expect an explanation—does not take this line, or any one line. He still deplores violence, but he says that he admires his brother for being able to inflict it: "In the last months of the war, the cannonades in Moscow whenever a major city fell—with every boom I felt your power." That, as the narrator has repeatedly told us, was when he was having his rapefest in Germany. At the same time, he was fighting the Nazis, and we approve of that, right? Lev seems to.

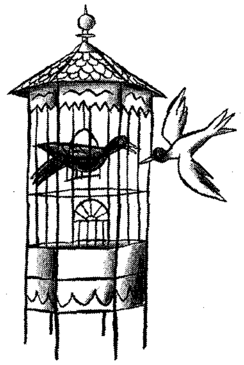
If Amis does no swaggering in his material about the camp, he makes up for it elsewhere. The narrator's addresses to his stepdaughter have an archness that sounds like bad Nabokov. There is also a great deal of linguistic fanciness. At one point, as the narrator is speaking of embracing a woman, he tells us about "the pendency beneath one armpit, the pendency under the other." It takes a minute to figure out that he's talking about breasts (which, to my knowledge, are not situated under the armpits). Then, there are the jokes that don't work. The narrator says that it's time for Russia to apologize for its crimes, as Germany has done: "Say sorry, someone. Someone tell me they're sorry. Go on. Cry me the Volga." Since these problems of tone are to be found only in the post-Gulag material, you might say that they are part of the work of characterization—that Amis put them there to show us the damage that the camp inflicted on this man. I wouldn't say that, though. Misjudged playfulness, go-to-the-dictionary vocabulary: these are staples of Amis's work. Fiction may have reined in his narcissism, but it certainly hasn't eliminated it.

I find these traits of his annoying, but they are part of something larger, which I cherish: his sheer courage as a writer. Consider his metaphors. When the narrator describes Zoya's throat as an aquarium, or when he speaks of those sent to the Gulag as "flung out over the shoulder of the world," he is telling you his story as much as when he is telling you his story. Recalling the harm he has done to others, he looks down at his hands, "the size of cheeseboards, no, cheeses, whole cheeses, with their pocks and ripples, their spread, their verdigris." This is not a metaphor in the sense of "*x* is *y*." It is a metaphor in the sense of the Symbolist poets: a hallucination. We don't just see the cheese; we smell it, and think, with recoil, about eating it. In the process, a whole dome of meanings, a specific emotional world—hunger, desire, disgust, rottenness—rises around us. That, together with people and a story, is all a novelist owes the reader. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Returning to Earth, *by Jim Harrison (Grove; $24).* In this moving meditation on life and afterlife, a northern Michigan family confronts devastating illness and death. Donald, suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease and disinclined to lose any more control over his failing body, asks his family to assist him in suicide and to bury him in a remote spot in Canada. Although the themes and preoccupations of Native American religion—Donald is "over half Chippewa"—form the narrative's spine, Harrison's handling remains admirably unsentimental. Bears, ravens, and lilacs (symbols of mourning and resurrection) appear repeatedly, yet the vividly depicted inner lives of the characters don't rely on metaphors for meaning. Harrison gradually illuminates the often traumatic past, throwing up shadows that signify the vast spaces of his imagined world.

Love in a Fallen City, *by Eileen Chang, translated from the Chinese by Karen S. Kingsbury and Eileen Chang (New York Review Books; $14.95).* Eileen Chang achieved early fame in China with the publication of two volumes of stories and essays in the nineteen-forties, but she emigrated for political reasons in the early nineteen-fifties, eventually settling in California, where she lived reclusively until her death, in 1995. The six stories in this collection reveal her to be a master of the form. They trace the fragile relations between men and women in Shanghai and Hong Kong, tragic figures who fail at love while battling the suffocating expectations of their elders. In the title story, a young divorcée risks her honor as she tries to start her life again with a wealthy playboy. Chang's world is a stark and mysterious place where people strive to find their way in love but often fail under the pressures of family, tradition, and reputation.



Sea of Thunder, *by Evan Thomas (Simon & Schuster; $27).* The Battle of Leyte Gulf, in October, 1944, was the largest naval engagement in history but has been overshadowed by Midway and Iwo Jima. Thomas tells the story through four commanders: an American admiral who ended his dispatches "KEEP 'EM DYING" but cried when ordering an attack; a Cherokee who graduated from Annapolis; a Japanese admiral who wrote poetry and dreamed of dying; and another whose colleagues "mistook his reticence for meekness." Two died in actions marked by futility and nobility; the other two emerged haunted by crucial strategic decisions made at the height of the battle. Thomas's prose keeps pace with the fight and captures its eerie quality, as when water dyed red by Japanese tracers washes over a sinking American ship and "sailors pulled and pushed, like ancient galley slaves, to manually shift the rudder." The result is both a naval adventure story and a striking meditation on the nature of military courage.

African Queen, *by Rachel Holmes (Random House; $23.95).* In this intelligent biography, Holmes uncovers the remarkable and tragic life of Saartjie Baartman, a South African indentured servant who was smuggled by her master to England, in 1810, and promptly became the most popular "human curiosity" in Piccadilly—the Hottentot Venus. Baartman sang, danced, and smoked a pipe, but the true attraction was her large, barely concealed bottom, subject to prodding by members of the public who "wished to ascertain that all was . . . 'nattral.' " Holmes frankly recounts how Baartman's rise to fame and her early death, a mere five years later, were the result of sentimental primitivism overlaid with the new pseudoscience of ethnography, "in which human beings became living specimens." After Baartman's death, parts of her body were publicly displayed in Paris until the nineteen-seventies; in 2002, South Africa successfully petitioned for their repatriation.

ON TELEVISION

POWER PLAY

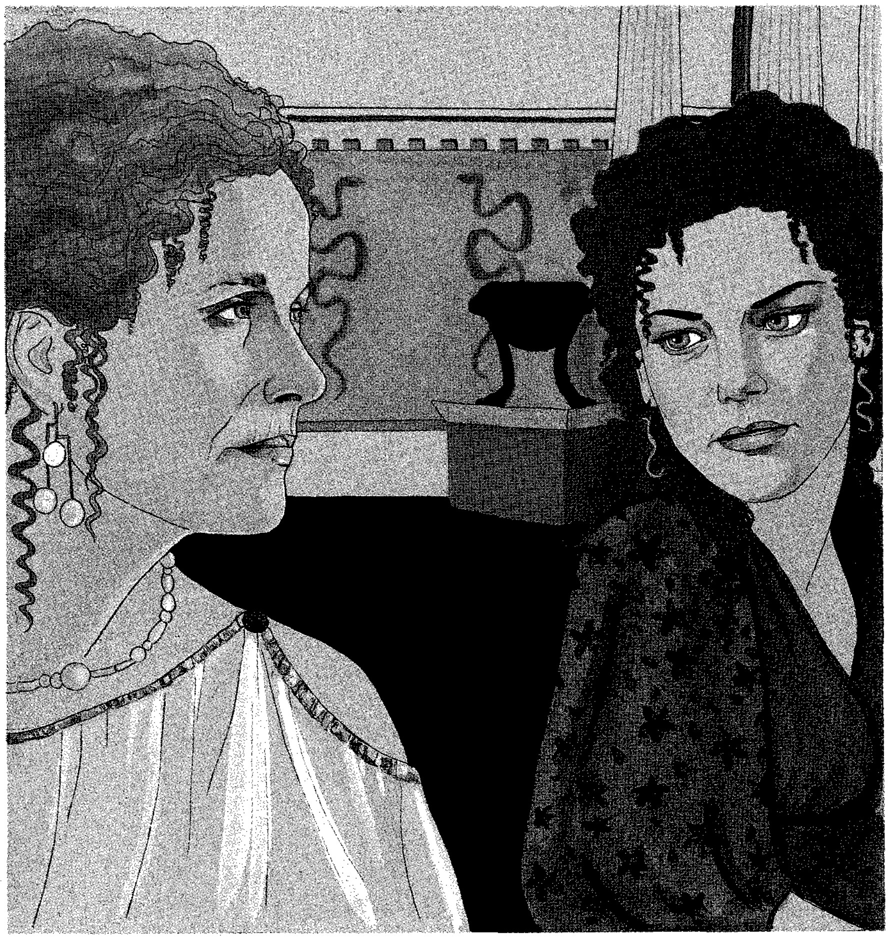
"Rome" returns to HBO.

BY TAD FRIEND

HBO has become hostage to its own success. We now expect its dramas not only to make us feel—a trick that any scriptwriter can perform by giving a tot a limp or a dog—but, rarest of joys, to make us think. The corpse-eating pigs and baroquely obscene insults on "Deadwood," for instance, served an argument that democracy in America emerged as the by-product of ruthless men's determination to preserve their wealth—in other words, as a cost of doing business.

With "Rome," a co-production with the BBC which returns this Sunday for its second (and final) season, HBO seemed, at first, to wrestle with its own reputation. The show labored to shatter our preconceptions about the slow-motion civil wars that followed Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon; evidently figuring that the oratory of the Julii had been dramatized by everyone from Shakespeare to Guccione, the series' creators opted for a grimy, Hogarthian look at everyday Italian life—"Deadwood" in tunics. Of course, you can't prune every scenic cliché from a sword-and-sandal epic, and "Rome" had its enjoyable share of sly eunuchs, assassins' faces webbed with blood, legionaries in their clanking baldrics and cuirasses, and lounging nobles nibbling, in turn, on a fig and a sibling. Somehow, though, the show spent more than a hundred million dollars and neglected to film the sine qua non of the genre: a monstrous battle that leaves us aghast at the waste of life and money. And Rome itself appeared to be inhabited by about thirty-eight people and four ubiquitous chickens. Granted, Cecil B. De Mille went too far the other way—but why make history's mightiest imperium look like a farm in the Ozarks? At the same time, the series' visual style was less revisionist than revisiting—a refrigerator soup of Hollywood's past Lucullan feasts. A bout in the arena, featuring a chain-saw massacre's worth of spurting limbs, was straight out of "Gladiator," and the show's trademark panning shot, a glide past a moaning naked couple to a slave woodenly manning a fan, was pure "Caligula."

Yet by midseason the soft-core sex had largely fallen away, and the show found its subject: power. Not the most original take on Rome, perhaps, but one that the writers realized with increasing subtlety. The portly town crier (Ian McNeice) embodied the culture's ingratiating hypocrisy: in a staccato manner reminiscent of Fox News, he delivered bulletins celebrating the latest battle's victors and lambasting last week's heroes as traitors. Those who fell, fell hard. In the seventh episode, the defeated consul Pompey, dazed and suddenly bereft of his followers, scratched out troop movements in the dirt, trying to make Caesar's rout of his forces at Pharsalus turn out otherwise. "That's how the Republic died," he murmured.



Lindsay Duncan (Servilia) and Polly Walker (Atia) show no mercy.

LARA TOMLIN

The second season opens with Caesar dead on the Senate floor, and we plunge into the silky, brutal jockeying for succession. First to stake his claim is Mark Antony (James Purefoy). Antony is an ill-tempered sot, but you have to admire his balls, if only because he waves them about so in repeated nude scenes. Seeking to bully Cicero (an exquisitely diffident David Bamber), the conscience of the Senate, into proposing that he govern Gaul, Antony sits his reluctant ally down. Then he approaches, menacingly parts his tunic—and urinates onto a nearby plant.

Cicero (shrinking away): The Senate would know I was backing you only through—through fear of death.

Antony: Oh . . . (mock dawning comprehension) Oh, I understand. You do not want to *seem* cowardly. Well, tell them I bribed you.

Cicero rises to the threat like a true Roman, denouncing Antony in the Senate: "You have brought upon us war, pestilence, and destruction. You are Rome's Helen of Troy." Prudently, however, he has a clerk read his remarks as he flees town in search of less barbaric allies.

Once "Rome" found its subject, the show's remaining issue—a perennial one for costume dramas—was which verbs would best summon it to life. What idiom conveys the glory that was Rome to a modern audience? As Hollywood bows to Britain on all things foreign or classy, the default model is a toga-draped Laurence Olivier or Richard Burton intoning limpid iambs. "Rome" updates that model, but not always enough. One of the show's wealthy idlers describes Macedonia as "filthy climate, vile food, beastly people," and the general Agrippa, having just blurted out his love to Octavia, apologizes like a stammering Hugh Grant: "Horrid imposition on my part, of course. You barely know me. Ridiculous." Meanwhile, commoners mutter Cockney slang such as "Bollocks to 'is, we'll be away for a bevvy." Perfect for the BBC, perhaps, but not for the American ear.

In "Gladiator," Russell Crowe's Maximus was a model of concision—"At my signal, unleash hell"—and his martial, mid-Atlantic argot played handsomely. "Rome," in its new season, absorbs that lesson and showcases its brusquest and most soldierly characters: its highborn women. The show's pitiless gorgons campaign ceaselessly to have their men crowned or killed, whichever. The notion that the Empire ran on pillow talk and poison—the Great Woman theory of history—was also at the heart of the BBC's 1976 "I, Claudius," but "Rome," with its spitting catfights, is closer in spirit to "Dynasty." Atia (Polly Walker) is Caesar's niece and Antony's lover and a real piece of work; when bidding adieu to the visiting Cleopatra, she embraces her rival for Antony's brutish affections and murmurs, "Die screaming, you pig-spawned trollop." Atia's nemesis is Servilia (a magnificently steely Lindsay Duncan), mother of Brutus and former lover of Caesar and of Atia's daughter Octavia. When Servilia is kidnapped by Atia, she bears up far better than Cicero would:

ATIA: "A slow and painful death." That's what you promised me.

SERVILIA: That's what you deserve.

ATIA: You think you're so fucking superior, don't you?

SERVILIA: You have no idea what I think. . . . Why do you keep talking? Kill me.

The show's actual soldiers, the short-tempered centurion Vorenus (Kevin McKidd) and the companionable legionary Pullo (Ray Stevenson), are comparatively maidenly. Vorenus and Pullo are constantly getting into scrapes in which their country's fortunes are at stake, and, like all literary warriors, they're far happier in battle than home by the fire. Last season, the men had a sweetly clueless exchange about how to talk to women ("Pretend you're putting a saddle on a skittish horse," Pullo suggested), a discourse that concluded with tentative musings on the clitoris.

The new episodes find Vorenus devastated by his wife's suicide. Believing himself accursed, he invites the gods' full wrath by publicly smashing a statue of the goddess Concord: "I am a son of Hades! I fuck Concord in her ass!" Vorenus also curses his children, but Pullo tries to reassure him that, since he didn't sacrifice an animal, "the curse isn't sealed." No fowl, no harm. Still, the children vanish. (In Hollywood, all maledictions take effect; faith, of any kind, must be rewarded.) "Rome" is profligate with its curses: Mark Antony swears of Brutus and his co-conspirators, "I'm going to eat their livers!" Octavia says of Servilia, her former lover, "I'll see her eaten by dogs." And Servilia execrates fickle Caesar with chilling precision: "Let his penis wither, let his bones crack, let him see his legions drown in their own blood."

This season sees rapid shifts in Rome's ruling authority—"Long live the Republic!" the town crier calls, hedging his bets—and a deepening of the show's understanding of where power ultimately resides. In the world view of the Republic, curses were the court of last appeal; soon, Rome's final word will belong to its Emperor. Power is not bestowed by the gods but seized by the ambitious. And it can even be used, we are rather brutally shown, to quell the unrest caused by other ambitious men—that is, for the public good. By challenging the liberal conviction that all power corrupts, the show, despite its flaws, has finally become a drama worthy of HBO's name. ♦

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If Potential winner cannot be contacted, or does not respond within five (5) days, or the prize or prize notification is returned as undeliverable, such potential winner forfeits all rights to any prize, and an alternate winner may be selected. All decisions of the judges are final and binding in all respects. The Grand Prize is a six-day transatlantic crossing for two aboard Carnival PLC, trading as Cunard Lines' Queen Mary 2®, October 7-13, 2007, with departure from New York, New York, on October 7, 2007, and arrival in Southampton, U.K., on October 13, 2007. Winner and travel companion must be available to travel on the same Cunard itinerary, as selected by Sponsor. All additional transportation, including airfare to New York, and return airfare to the United States, is not included. Balcony stateroom for two, select meals, and select entertainment is included. 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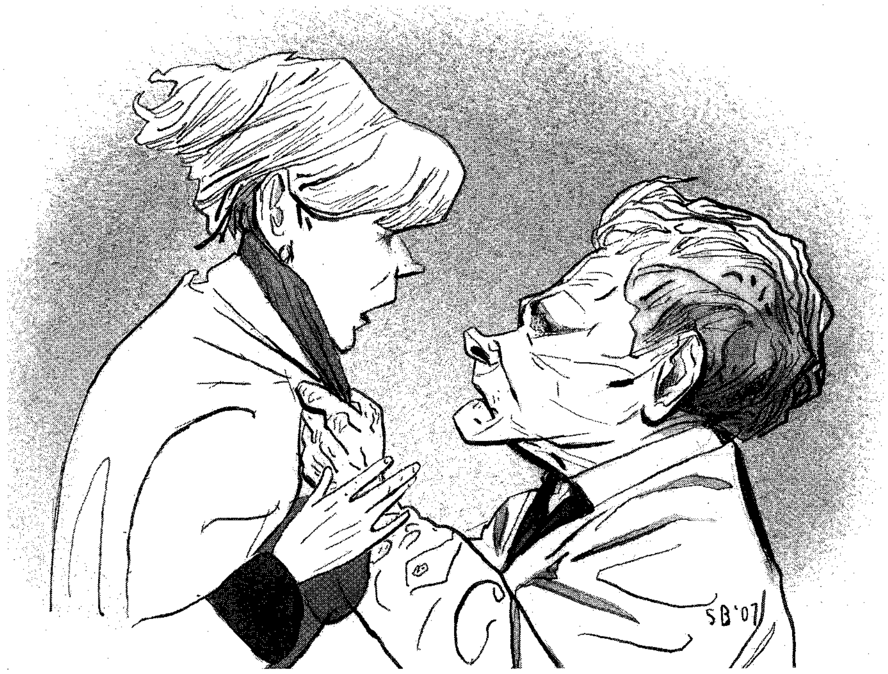
THE CURRENT CINEMA

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

"Notes on a Scandal" and "Letters from Iwo Jima."

BY DAVID DENBY



Cate Blanchett and Judi Dench in an adaptation of a novel by Zoë Heller.

STEVE BRODNER

Humbert Humbert, the debonair lovesick scoundrel who narrates Nabokov's "Lolita," tries mightily to convince us of his essential sanity. And Barbara Covett, the predatory aging schoolteacher who narrates Zoë Heller's novel "What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal" (2003), wants us to believe that she's a generous and good friend. They're initially so plausible, these monsters of calculation! They try to fool us the same way they fool the world. Part of the fun of reading such books is slowly discovering the truth of events that the narrators describe with self-serving relish. But, if you're a filmmaker, how do you transfer the point of view of a character like Humbert or Barbara to a movie? A few lines of voice-over narration don't really do the trick, and the occasional use of the camera as a first-person device, as in Robert Montgomery's "Lady in the Lake," in which the camera takes the hero's point of view throughout—and even gets sucker-punched and blacks out—seems more silly than expressive.

Stanley Kubrick found one solution, with "Lolita." Now the playwright-screenwriter Patrick Marber and the director Richard Eyre have adapted Heller's novel into a wonderfully entertaining movie, "Notes on a Scandal." We see Barbara (Judi Dench) and all the other characters in the usual way, from outside, but we also hear long excerpts from Barbara's gleeful diary as she wreaks havoc on the world. Barbara teaches at an ordinary "comprehensive school" in North London, a place, as she describes it, of habitual underachievement, in which knobby-kneed boys and bland-looking girls stumble their way into the unchanging British lower middle class. Disappointed in her own life, Barbara refuses to entertain any hopes for her students. She's an envious and miserable woman, and a touch mad, but, even as we long for her to be thwarted, we laugh at her acid take on life. Marber and Eyre have honored both the actual world—we can see it for ourselves—and Barbara's malicious and jaundiced view.

One of the things that amuse Barbara is the way Sheba (Cate Blanchett), a beautiful new art teacher at the school, thinks she can make a difference in the lives of her students. Sheba particularly thinks she can help Steven Connolly (Andrew Simpson), a fifteen-year-old with dark eyes, a wolfish smile, and some minor ability as a draftsman. Steven, however, is not seeking a career in art. He boldly pursues Sheba, who is married to an older man (Bill Nighy) and is the mother of two, and Sheba, excited by the student's longing for her, gives in to a reckless affair. From that point on, the suspense is nearly Hitchcockian in intensity: Will Sheba destroy herself and her family life over her passion for a mere boy? Barbara, who, it turns out, has her own designs on Sheba, discovers the affair, and then Sheba, who trusts her, tells her everything. Will Barbara succeed in gaining control of the younger woman?

I would hate to see moviegoers deny themselves the pleasures of "Notes on a Scandal" on the ground, as some reviewers have priggishly complained, that both women behave badly. Barbara Covett, a repressed lesbian, is a vicious descendant of Henry James's Olive Chancellor, the high-minded but morally blind older woman who tries to dominate the ingenuous Verena Tarrant in "The Bostonians." Barbara may be a fright, but, as Judi Dench plays her, she's hardly a stereotype. Abrupt and formidable, she can silence a class of noisy teens with a stare and freeze the faculty-room banter with a put-down. But when we hear her read from her diary, in which her hopes of taking control of other people are mixed with girlish romantic dreams, Dench's voice slips into a yearning croon. And when Barbara's self-control collapses, Dench's facial muscles tighten, her eyes dance, her stolid carriage tilts upward in a rage. Dench is in her early seventies; you are meant to notice the wrinkles, the hair colored a dead-looking reddish-brown. In England, it seems, actresses have nothing to fear from age. They can simply wait for writers to create fresh work for them.

Barbara's infatuation with Sheba is amplified by the way the cinematographer Chris Menges bathes Cate Blanchett in light. Her long blond hair falling out of a bun, her slender body bending and twisting like a stalk in the breeze, Blanchett has never been more appealing on film. Her Sheba is a kindly, rather naïve upper-middle-class bohemian, a careless demigoddess who takes the world's good will for granted. She knows that having sex with a cheeky pale boy in a damp train yard is crazy, but she can't stop herself—she's thrilled as much by her own desire to transgress as by Steven, whose attractions are no more than moderate. Blanchett goes through the stages of resistance and abandon with dedication to each moment of pleasure and guilt. The enactment of the affair in front of the camera—rather than, as in the book, through Barbara's disgusted retelling—makes for an enormous gain in physical and psychological plausibility. Score one for the art of film adaptation.

Barbara's narration may seem, at first, a noirish device, but this brightly lit movie is not another noir exercise; the emphasis is on class and manners, not on dark hidden places. Marber has culled Heller's best lines and added some irresistible sallies of his own. His perceptions of how the world works are as decisive as a slap, and Eyre gets shockingly candid performances from the actors. "Notes on a Scandal," a hurried, brilliant ninety-two minutes long, is structured as a series of graded dramatic climaxes leading to linked explosions. When the scandal breaks into the open, and the actors let loose at each other (Bill Nighy erupts with incandescent fury as the cuckolded husband), English circumspection gives way to English directness, which is far more explicit than the American version of truth-telling. We may excel in physical violence, but, when it comes to scathing tirades and barbarous insults, we are mere beginners.

In Clint Eastwood's "Letters from Iwo Jima," the Japanese star Ken Watanabe, who plays General Kuribayashi, the defender of the island, sweeps off his Army cap and snaps his head downward in an abrupt bow. This curt signature gesture, performed before his officers, is an expression of mastery and, at the same time, of submission—to duty, to Japan, and to death. Eastwood, in such movies as "Unforgiven," "Million Dollar Baby," and his two Iwo Jima films ("Letters" is a companion piece to "Flags of Our Fathers," released last fall), has become the Ernest Hemingway of film directors, a man bound, by his own sense of duty, to celebrate valor in defeat. In the early scenes of "Flags of Our Fathers," we experienced the vulnerability of the American marines: the Japanese Army, dug into caves and tunnels, lured the Americans onto the beach by holding their fire. Now, in a unique reversal of perspective, we are inside the caves and tunnels. Thrown among the Others—the foreigners hated for their seeming strangeness as much as for their threat—we find ourselves in the morally demanding but exhilarating position of rooting for them. They are outnumbered, they will not be reinforced, and their country expects them to die. They are men with families, wives, and even some benevolent feelings about their American foe. The movie leaves out any reference to Japanese atrocities in China and elsewhere, and this may rankle countries with bad memories of Japanese occupation. On Iwo Jima in 1945, however, the Japanese are not military fascists but men deciding how to die well. The movie, which is almost entirely in Japanese, and burnished with a scrupulous sense of respect, is an exploration of the varieties of stoicism.

"Letters from Iwo Jima," taken together with "Flags," is a considerable act of ethical imagination, and I wish I could say that it was also a great film. But both General Kuribayashi and his friend and fellow-officer Baron Nishi (Tsuyoshi Ihara), an Olympic equestrian before the war, are such idealized officer figures—modest and gallant—that they lose any serious interest as characters, and a lesser officer who pressures his men into suicide passes by too quickly to register as more than a will-driven fanatic. The young Japanese soldier Saigo (Kazunari Ninomiya), a gentle baker who was conscripted into the Army and just wants to get back to his family, is meant to be a life-affirming figure among the death cultists, but, as constructed by the screenwriter, Iris Yamashita, he's a slight and bashful man who can't carry the philosophical weight assigned to him. The movie was impressively shot by the cinematographer Tom Stern in the same style as "Flags"—largely in black-and-white, with occasional flashes of wine-dark blood or orange flame—but the many scenes in caves and tunnels induce claustrophobia. One could say that Eastwood had little choice: any Japanese soldier who stepped outside after the huge American force established itself on the island had to face devastating fire. The repetitiveness of the visual scheme is inherent in the authentic way that Eastwood conceived his two-part film. But the project lacks the variety of sensuous pleasures that a great movie has to provide. ◆

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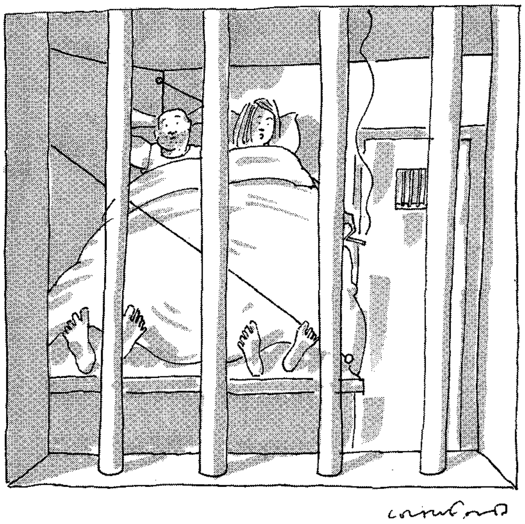
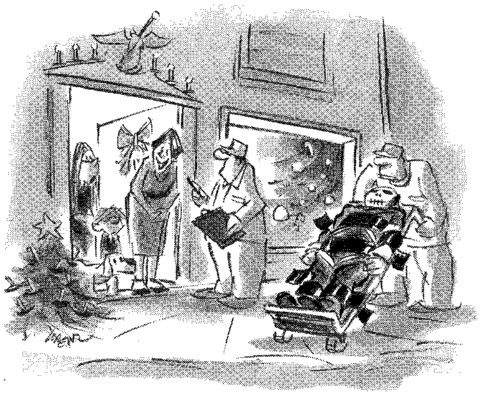
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Leo Cullum, must be received by Sunday, January 14th. Finalists in the December 25th & January 1st contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 29th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"How about we just stay in tonight?"
David Ruebeck, Minneapolis, Minn.



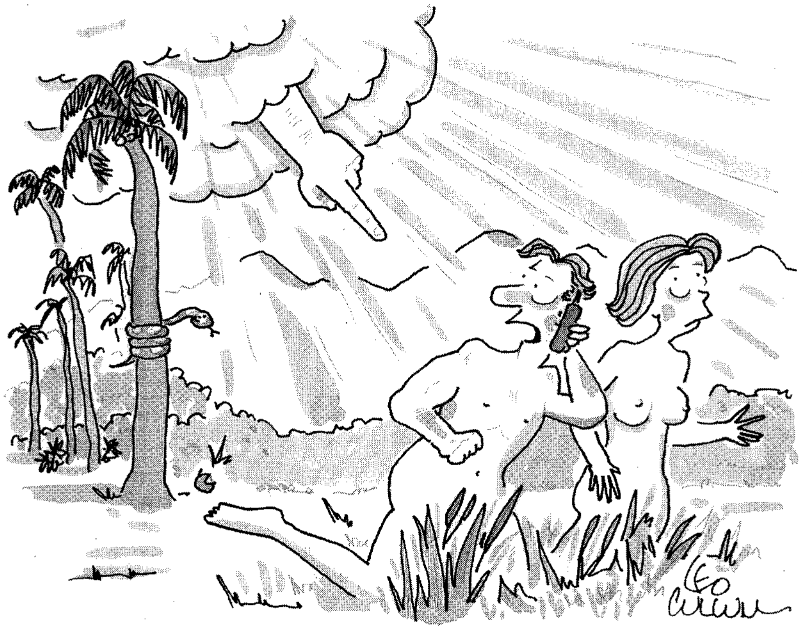
THE FINALISTS

"It looks like someone's going to have the complete set!"
Judy Lennon, Reynoldsburg, Ohio

"Look, honey, it's the new Tickle Me Maniac."
Lynn Tudor, New York City

"I thought Grampy Willis would enjoy being exhumed for the holidays."
Scott Ollinger, Eliot, Me.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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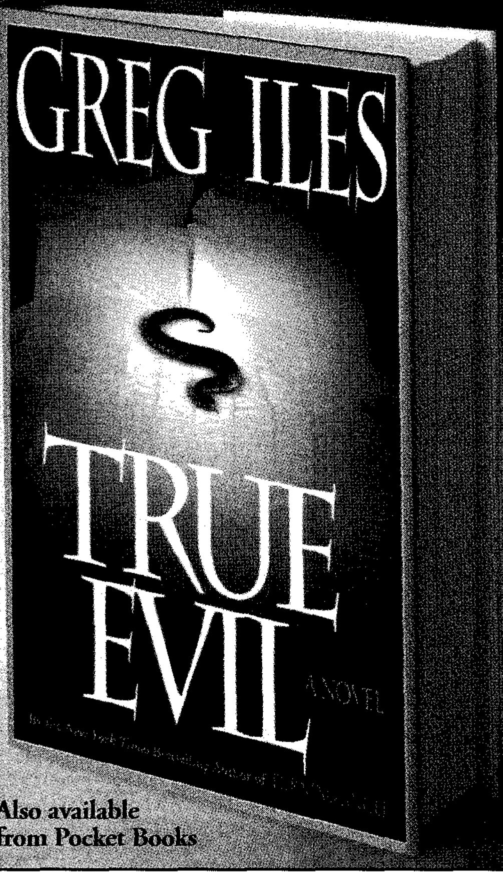
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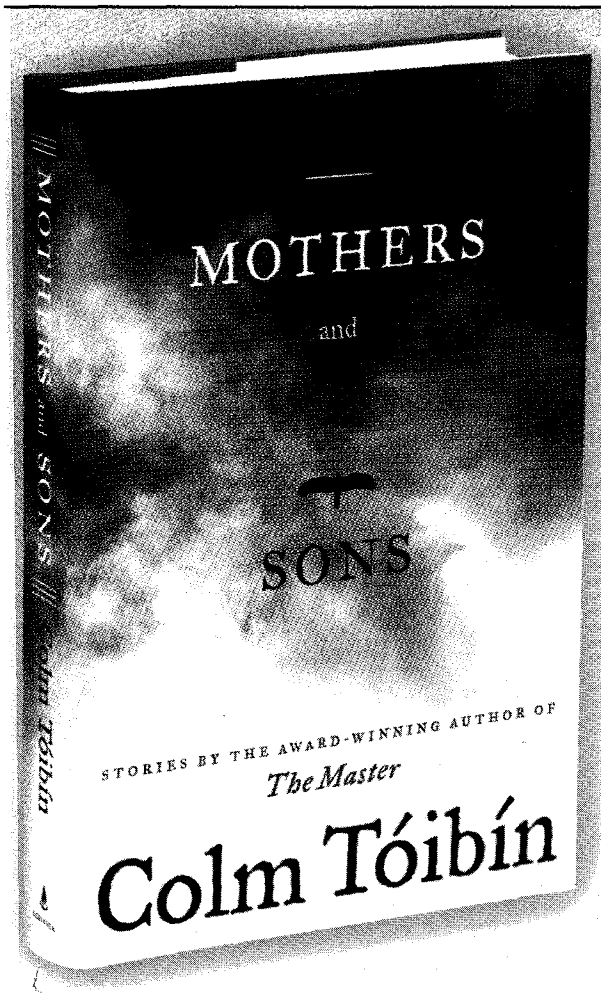
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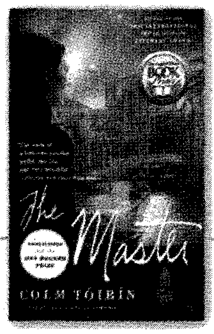
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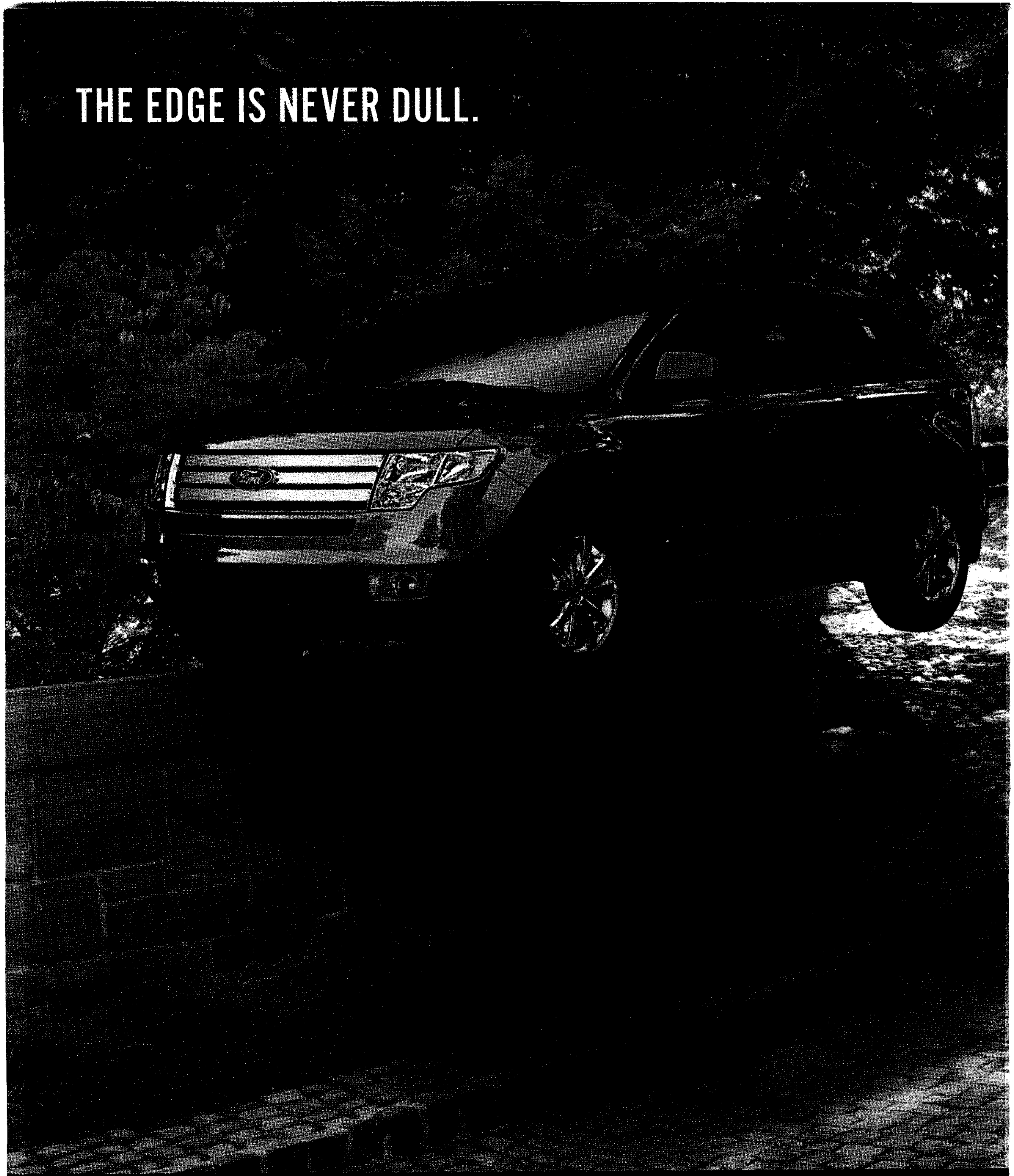

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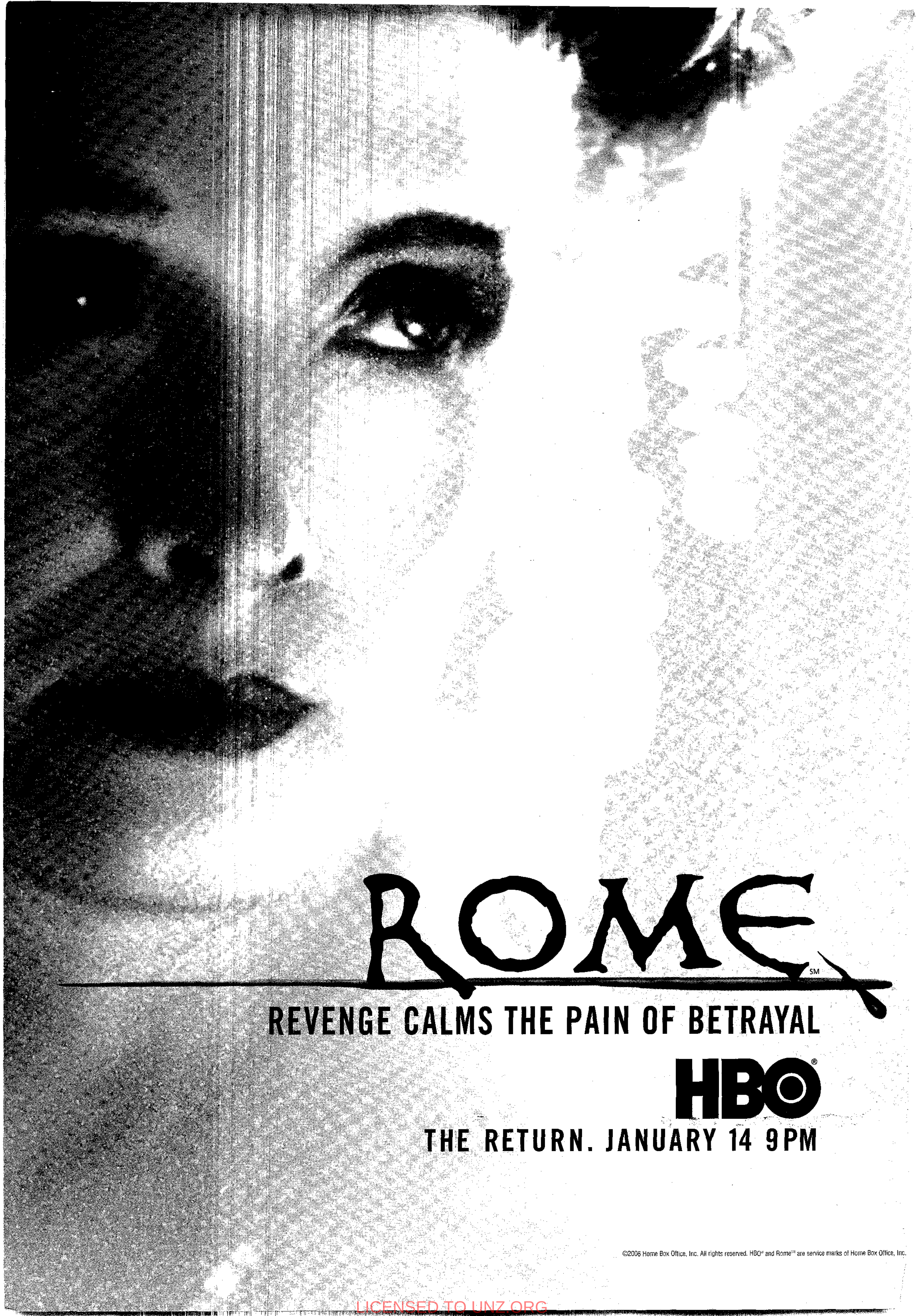
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